SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

DEC.

15¢

STAR WESTERN

BIGG… …ORIES OF T…

ROAN
BLACKBURN
COX
LINFORD

THE SON OF HORSE THIEF BRITT
VIGOROUS RANGE NOVEL
by WALT COBURN

A NEW GUN-CHORE FOR THE DEACON
A DEACON BOTTLE NOVEL By
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

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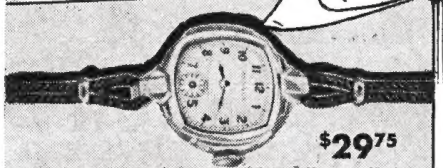

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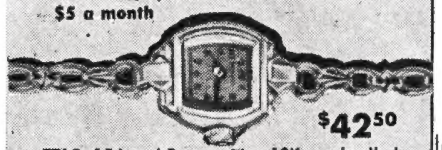

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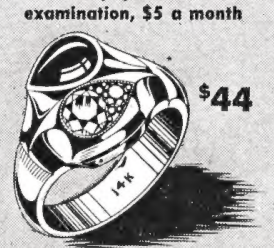

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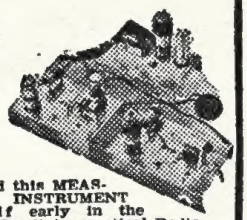

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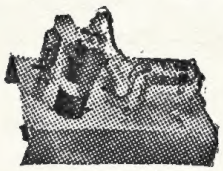

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SEVEN SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-ONE DECEMBER, 1943 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Seven Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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★ ★ Star Western Features ★ ★

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Where all those interested in the Old West swap friendly talk. . . .

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Fighting men make good writing men.

JANUARY ISSUE OUT DECEMBER 10th!

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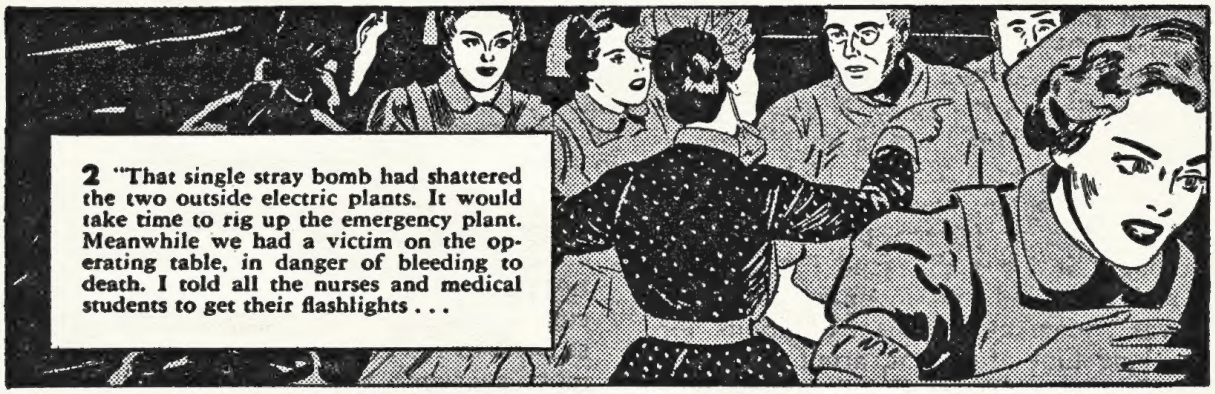
BLACKOUT IN THE OPERATING ROOM!

A true story of the war, as told by SISTER ISABEL NIXON, *Head Nurse of St. Thomas Hospital, London,* to a war correspondent.

The centuries-old London hospital has three distinctions. It is London's most bombed hospital (undoubtedly because of its proximity to the Houses of Parliament just across the Thames). It has not during this war lost an air raid victim. And it was the home of Florence Nightingale. Headnurses still wear the same uniform and lace-edged frilled bonnets pioneer Nightingale wore during the Crimean campaign.

1 "It happened during a lull, after many hours of continuous bombing. We were operating on casualties brought to the underground emergency theatre. There was a terrific explosion nearby, then such a frightening blackness as could only come in an operating room . . .



2 "That single stray bomb had shattered the two outside electric plants. It would take time to rig up the emergency plant. Meanwhile we had a victim on the operating table, in danger of bleeding to death. I told all the nurses and medical students to get their flashlights . . .

3 "We grouped around the table, giving the surgeon the light he needed to save his patient . . . Because of the highly inflammable ether we couldn't have used a hurricane lamp. This was one of many, many cases where only flashlights with proper batteries could have been used to save life."

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Conducted by Strawboss

LIKE the Irishman who saw a camel for the first time, then swore up and down that there "war'nt no sich animule," we're still a little leery of a white buffalo. However, we're no one to doubt the word of J. B. Miller, of Los Angeles, who writes in as follows concerning that strange beast:

Dear Strawboss:

I remember some forty or more years ago I saw what was supposed to have been the only white buffalo in existance, which was stuffed, and on exhibit at the Kansas State Capitol, in Topeka. According to the story, it was shot by one Prairie Dog Dave, a buffalo hunter during the early Sixties. Bob Wright, famous hunter, merchant, and one of the founding fathers of Dodge City, bought it for a thousand dollars. He had it stuffed and mounted it, and it was shown at various exhibitions for a long time after that, around Kansas.

It seems strange that, with the millions of buffalo on our Western plains, that there is recorded only that single specimen. Do you think it could have been a hoax, or do some of your gang know of any other that has ever been found?

We'll have to leave that up to the readers of this department. Any takers?

And from John Brown, of Chicago:

Dear Strawboss:

I have often heard of the Skinner's War, but know it only by name. Could you tell me something about it?

Yes. During the early '70's in Southwest Texas, the cattle market was at its lowest ebb. Range cattle were worth more for their skins than they were for beef. Consequently, cattle thieves turned to skinning other folks' stock. Their method was ingenious, if crude. Equipped with forked knives on long handles, they would ride behind a herd, shove the sharp blades against a leg-tendon, hamstringing the animal. They'd do this to several cattle from the herd, then circle back, kill them, and start their skinning operations.

Climax of the so-called war came when Texas ranchers found the skinner's headquarters, a ranch on the border between McMullen and Duval Counties, in Texas. There they fought and hanged fifteen of the thieves, and found more than three hundred hides ready to be sold. The ranch was situated on Devil's River, and to this day bears the name of Dead Man's Ranch.

A couple of issues back, we ran an article about the famous Lost Cement Mine, up close to the California-Nevada Line. And now from J. H. Nichols of Birmingham comes this interesting footnote to that story:

Dear Strawboss:

I recall that in the piece you published about the Lost Cement Mine you mentioned that it seemed to be under a curse—as, indeed, so many lost mines seemed to have been—insomuch as almost everyone who was supposed to have found the hidden treasure came to a violent end.

I was rather surprised that your correspondent didn't include the little story of Dead Man's Creek, an episode of the same country, and taking place about the same time that the hunt for the Cement golconda was under way.

In 1861, a man named Farnsworth reported in Monoville that he had found a vein—perhaps the very one they were all hunting for—buried in that peculiar cement-like formation—near the headwaters of the Owen River.

For anyone who would help him work the claim, Farnsworth offered a fifty-fifty share in his find. A man took him up, and they departed to work the claim, but next Spring, only Farnsworth returned. He went on to Carson.

Robert Hume, a merchant of San Francisco joined him, and advanced Farnsworth seven hundred dollars to build a mill at the claim. Again they left.

(Please turn to page 128)

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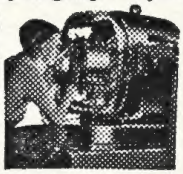

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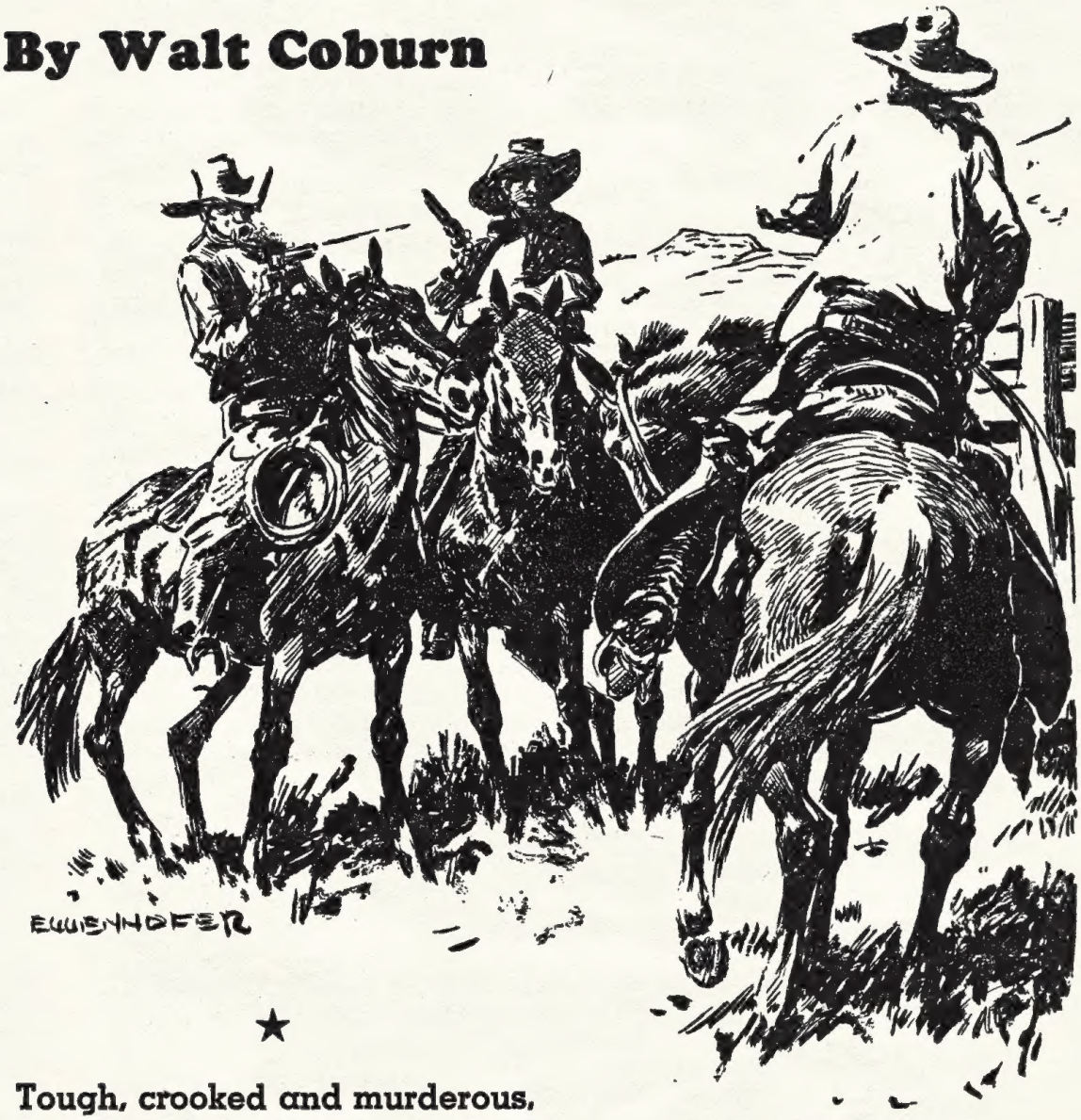
★ ★ THE SON OF

Powerful Manhunt Novel

By Walt Coburn



★

Tough, crooked and murderous, the Ragsdale Brothers had everything fixed to complete their history-making Wagon Wrench steal—if they could make that tough, mule-headed young outlaw, Buckshot Britt, see reason—through the muzzle-end of a blazing .45!

★

CHAPTER ONE

Bushwhack on Blacktail Creek

STOCK INSPECTOR RYE PICKETT counted what cartridges he had left, weighed them in a lop-sided balance in favor of the three remaining horse thieves who had him ambushed, and told himself he was in a kind of a tight. That was as close as the grizzled old cowman would come to telling himself he was licked. For licked meant dead in old Rye Pickett's book.

HORSE THIEF BRITT

Wayne Ragsdale's six-shooter was belching flame. . . .

Every time he moved behind his unsatisfactory shelter of rocks and buckbrush, .30-30 bullets whined around him like a swarm of hornets. And he could hear his three assailants calling back and forth from the safe boulders on either side of the trail. They had trapped the stock inspector when he stopped to water his horse at Little Blacktail Creek.

Damn a horse that would spook from a popping gun and quit a man thataway! Stampeding off into the breaks with a man's saddle carbine and two boxes of cartridges in one of the saddle pockets. Served you right for borrowing the loan of a strange horse that turned out to be gun-shy!

He had stepped off onto the bank of the creek and unbuckled the throatlatch on the bridle, slid the bridle free of the big brown geldin's ears, so as to drop the bit from its mouth And with the headstall slid back, bit free to let the horse drink better, Rye Pickett had bent down on all fours to drink upstream, with the bridle reins loose in one hand.

He'd taken his first swallow of creek water when that Fourth of July fire-

works had broke loose. Bullets kicking jets of water and gravel in his face, and one of 'em creasing the muscle along the back of his shoulders. Another .30-30 slug tore a gash along his thigh. And that gun-shy horse had snorted, jerked loose, and was gone like he had a can of firecrackers tied to his tail.

Rye Pickett had rolled over and dived headlong into the buckrush, yanking at his six-shooter. Rye Pickett was mad to the marrow of his bones with a futile rage, so filled with cold fury and self-disgust that it was a minute or two before he felt pain from the two bullet rips.

Set afoot, he gritted, here in the badlands, with nothing but a six-shooter. He'd followed the warm trail of a bunch of stolen horses and he didn't know how many horse thieves, and he'd crowded 'em hard. So naturally, they'd thrown their bunch of stolen horses into a box canyon and set a bushwhacker trap. Stock Inspector Rye Pickett had ridden down into it like a pilgrim tenderfoot. Well, the old sayin' had it that there's no fool like an old 'un.

Those guns had sounded almighty close when they opened up. And he'd taken a snapshot at one man and hit him and then shot him a second time to make sure he was dead—which he sure was. He lay half in and half out of the water a little below the crossing, his blood shading the creek water a pale pink and his head and one shoulder below the surface.

But by the time Rye Pickett got himself a hole burrowed into the heavy bunkbrush and was crouched low between some rocks, the other horse thieves had slipped back out of six-shooter range. Now they were playing fancy tunes with their saddle carbines and when he shot at the puffs of gunsmoke up on both steep brushy, rocky sides of the creek canyon, his .45 slugs fell short. All his old wooden-handled six-shooter was good for was to make a loud noise that mocked his own ears. An old hand like him, Rye Pickett! A hell of a way to die!

The sun was setting and only the ragged edges of the badlands were lighted by its last slanting rays. In half an hour there wouldn't be enough light to line their gun sights.

"Let's finish off the ol' buzzard," called one of them, "an' git along."

"What time you a-holdin' by the guard watch?"

"Supper time. And my empty belly's all the watch I need, feller. Smoke the ol' rannyhan out."

"He's done throwed his last good man into the pen. Got ary last word fer us to pass along fer you, Pickett?"

A little shower of bullets struck the rocks around him and whined off, showering his leathery face with sandstone that bit into his hide like tiny birdshot. The brim of his sweat-marked Stetson was yanked low across his shaggy brows to protect his ice-blue eyes. He had wasted a lot of cartridges making a harmless noise.

Every chamber in the cylinder of his old six-shooter held a cartridge but the loops of his old cartridge belt were empty. He crouched lower. If they were foolish enough to charge him, he'd learn 'em that the old gray wolf in a trap could still be dangerous.

But they weren't that empty-skulled. There was a short lull now in their shooting. The owner of a nasal voice who seemed to be the ramrod, called the orders for the kill.

"Line your sights on that leetle green patch where the brush grows thick between them two biggest rocks. Keep a-shootin' till he's dead. . . . All set, boys. Let 'im have 'er!"

Three saddle carbines cracked all at once. Their bullets were missing old Rye Pickett by tiny inches. Any split second now one of those bullets would find him. They'd ride away and leave his bullet riddled body behind for the wolves and coyotes. . . . Tough on his daughter, Abbie. . . .

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THE the bullets were going wild, hitting the top of the rocks and snarling off into the air. And the horse thief with the nasal voice was yelling: "Dammit, I'm shot!"

A gun that had a slightly heavier sound, was talking fast from the scrub timbered hogback above. And a new voice lifted:

"Stand your hands, coyotes! You brag about your bein' tough! Now play your strings out!"

Another of the three bushwhackers let out a yelp of pain. Then there was only scattered shooting and crashing through the brush as three riders tried for a fast getaway. That one new gun kept firing.

"Keep a-driftin'!" shouted the newcomer. "I'm pickin' up them stolen ponies. If you want 'em so damn' bad, fight for 'em!"

Rye Pickett sighted the three horse thieves as they topped the ridge and vanished from sight, spurring their horses to a run. The stock inspector straightened his cramped legs and got slowly to his feet. He stood there, tall and lean and straight-backed. His slow, mirthless grin was hidden by his drooping gray mustache. He watched the rider let his big roan horse pick its way down the slant from hogback.

The rider was a big man. His square, blunt-featured face was clean shaven, his hair wiry and black and his eyes set under heavy black brows.

A new box-magazine .30-40 cavalry carbine lay across his saddle as he rolled a cigarette on his way down the steep trail, smoke curled lazily from his wide nostrils when he spoke.

"I bet Horse Thief Britt is shore a-pitchin' in his grave," he said. His voice was a lazy, humorous drawl.

"Don't gamble on that, Buckshot," Rye Pickett answered. "Long time no see."

"And the last time you sighted me I was headed yonderly, Pickett, with you packin' a bench warrant with my name on it. You'd done killed Horse Thief Britt. You was aimin' to hamstring his whelp Buckshot. But I hightailed it ten jumps ahead of a law posse, an' lookin' back acrost my shoulder. . . .

"I've bin on the dodge for five years, Pickett. Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, as far south as New Mexico and Arizona. Breakin' broncs for big horse outfits, ridin' the rough string, brush-poppin' in the roughs along the Mexican Border, till I got weary of quittin' jobs every time I sighted a man wearin' a law badge. So I come back to Montana. And if anybody had ever told me I'd be sidin' the man that killed my daddy, I'd have knocked him down for a damned liar. . . . Well, Pickett, it's me'n you now. Ary loads left in your smokepole?"

Stock Inspector Rye Pickett shoved his old six-shooter back into its holster and shook his grizzled head.

"Empty," he lied flatly, and reached in his shirt pocket for tobacco and papers. "You've growed, Buckshot. You was a slim kid five years ago; about sixteen-seventeen then. That'll make you somewheres aroun' twenty one now."

"Twenty-two." Buckshot Britt shoved his hand into the deep pocket of his bullhide chaps and brought out some .45 cartridges. "Old enough, Pickett, to take 'er up where Horse Thief Britt left off. Here's ca'tridges for that hog-leg of yourn. We might as well git the job done here as fu'ther up the crick."

"If your dead daddy could talk, Buckshot," said Rye Pickett slowly, "he'd tell you to tuck in your shirt-tail. I had no part in the killin' of Horse Thief Britt."

"That's a damned lie!"

"You'll have to take that 'un back, son." Rye Pickett spoke without anger. "More'n that, you'll help me make you swaller it. Now I'm gittin' me a drink of that crick water. Bleedin' gives a man a thirst fer water, thataway."

Rye Pickett's lean, leathery face looked gray in the first shadows of twilight. His hard blue eyes were pain seared.

"I can't tell you fer certain who killed your daddy, Buckshot," he said. "I don't make a statement till I kin back it up with solid proof. I aim to git that proof. Might be you kin lend a hand. You'd do fer the right man to take along on the job. Now if you'll move that big roan geldin' outa the way, I'll git to the crick."

Buckshot Britt reined his horse to one side. Stock Inspector Rye Pickett took a step forward, lurched like a drunken man, then fell like an empty sack. He lay there with his eyes closed and his skin was the color of dead ashes.

BUCKSHOT BRITT was pouring water into the stock inspector's face when Rye Pickett's eyes blinked open. The husky young cowhand

helped the older man to the edge of the creek. Rye Pickett drank slowly, then bathed his head and face in the cool creek water.

Blood soaked through the back of his vest and made a red stain across his shoulders. He sat on the creek bank and stripped to the waist. Buckshot bathed the bullet rip and bandaged it. Then rolled and lit a cigarette and handed it to the older man.

"You're a good man, Buckshot," Rye Pickett broke the long silence when they had bandaged the bullet tear in the stock inspector's hide. "You was always a good kid. Kinda wild and wanted to be tough, but you wasn't ornery ner mean. And you was always a good hand with a green bronc. And while you was hell fer teasin' her, you always taken my kid Abbie's part at school. . . .

"I'm sorry you ever got that notion I killed your daddy. I'd have ketched up with you when you quit the country, and fetched you back and mebbyso we'd have got your daddy's killer or killers right then. But somebody laid for me along the trail; shot my horse an' crippled me.

"Delbert Ragsdale tried to make me believe it was you that bushwhacked me. But I knowed better. Wild and hot headed as you was, you mighta shot me fer the man that killed your daddy. But nothin' ner nobody on earth could make me believe young Buckshot Britt would shoot a horse. . . .

"I never had no bench warrant for you, son. I was the sheriff then, to be sure. And Del Ragsdale was servin' as a deputy under me. It was Del that taken after you with a knotheaded pool-room posse. I was glad that you got away.

"Del Ragsdale got to be sheriff while I was still laid up. He's still wearin' that law badge. I'm whittlin' along as stock inspector. Kinda stove up. Looks like my laigs ain't all that limps when I git lame-brained enough to ride into a gun-trap jackpot like this 'un.

"I was a goner when you horned into the fight, Buckshot. I ain't got around to thankin' you. Won't try. But unless I'm cut down, I'm huntin' down the killer or killers that murdered Horse Thief Britt. I'd be proud to have your help, Buckshot."

Buckshot Britt was red-faced and his words stumbled clumsily when he found his voice. "Gosh, Rye, I'm thick-skulled. Like you said, I've grown a lot. An' my brain never growed to fit my beef. . . . But they told me that Sheriff Rye Pickett had killed my dad and that you was after me with a bench warrant. And five years on the dodge didn't help me think straight. I rode back up the trail to kill you, sir."

Rye Pickett said he savvied how Buckshot had felt about it. And that between them, they'd get the kinks stretched out of Buckshot's rope. . . .

". . . . if we have to hang a man, son, to straighten it out. Who was it told you I'd killed your daddy?"

"Curly Jones. I was alone at the Wagon Wrench horse camp at the mouth of Little Blacktail, where the crick empties into the Missouri River. It was some time durin' the night when Curly rode up to the camp. He told me to take my pick outa the Wagon Wrench remuda and hightail it till I got plumb outa the country. Because you'd ketched Horse Thief Britt up to his old tricks and killed him. And it would go hard with me when the Law read the worked brands on some of them new horses that had been dropped in the horse pasture at the Little Blacktail camp. There was about fifty head of stolen horses in the pasture right then. Left there, night after night, in little bunches of ten or a dozen head."

"Who was leavin' them stolen horses there of a night, Buckshot?"

"I never knowed. Our ranch was down the river at the mouth of Big Blacktail. Once I rode down there and told my dad that somebody was dumpin' stolen horses in the Wagon Wrench pasture and what should I do about it?

"He told me to keep my mouth shut, to stay inside my cabin of a night or I might git earmarked by a bullet. That I was paid to jingle that Wagon Wrench remuda left at the horse camp between round-ups. And that I wouldn't git hurt if I minded my own horse wranglin' job and kep' my nose clean outa anything else.

"He'd started his drinkin' again, an' was ornery. So I rode back to the horse camp, scared and worried. I never saw him again. And when Curly told me that he was killed and you was on your way to the horse camp, I drug it. I was a scared to death kid when I quit the country. But five years of driftin' has showed me how to take my own part. You might figger that my old man ain't worth fightin' for. But he was my father. He was worth it to me!"

Rye Pickett had been studying the young cowpuncher who had grown into the living image of the man Montana had called Horse Thief Britt. Unless Rye Pickett was a sorry judge of men, young Buckshot had something that had been sadly lacking in his renegade father. He might make mistakes in his bull-headed way of going at a thing, but he would never learn how to be underhanded or sly or meanly crooked. If he had survived the past five years that must have been tough and bitter, without making any bad mistakes, then he had whipped the worst of his fight.

"Since you left here, Buckshot," Rye Pickett spoke quietly, "you ain't bin mixed up in anything too bad?"

"You won't find ary snake tracks along my back trail," came the quick reply. "I kin go back to any place I've ever bin. Like I come back here to Montana."

"Good boy! Now I'll borrow the loan of that dead feller's horse and saddle gun. And we'll pick up them stolen horses them other three gents ain't botherin' to collect."

CHAPTER TWO

Double Steal at the Wagon Wrench

BUCKSHOT BRITT had managed to keep his boy's broad sense of humor. And when, back at the Wagon Wrench horse camp at the mouth of Little Blacktail Creek, his grin was wide as he pointed to a bunch of scattered grazing horses.

"I watched them four fellers throw a bunch of horses up into a box canyon on feed and water. Then they rode off. I taken a look at the brands on the horses, figgered they was stolen, and hazed 'em on down into the horse pasture and wired the gates shut. I was cold trailin' 'em back up the crick when I heard shootin'.

"It taken a while to figger it out that they'd set a bushwhacker trap for a lone man that was after 'em. I heard 'em holler your name. Saw what the odds was and when the sign was right I horned in. I could have picked all three of 'em off, but it was more fun just nickin' their hides. Scarin' 'em."

"Anyhow," grinned Rye Pickett slowly, "I was your private bear meat."

Buckshot's face reddened in the moonlight and he shifted in his saddle. Then he saw the older man's blue eyes pucker and he grinned widely.

They did not bother to open the wired gate. There was grub and a couple or three bedrolls at the horse camp. They had picked up the horse that had spooked and left the stock inspector afoot. And Rye Pickett had identified the dead bushwhacker as a Wagon Wrench cowpuncher called Shorty. Buckshot said there were about ten or fifteen Wagon Wrench horses in the stolen bunch of nearly a hundred head.

"But why anybody would bother to run off them sorry culls, I don't know. Two-three of 'em is already lame. The others is old and stove up cow ponies that should be pensioned. The rest of the bunch is pure cream. Some broke, others is broncs. But all of 'em young horses and tops. How'd you figger them Wagon Wrench culls, sir?"

"That's a question I'm goin' to ask Curly Jones," said the stock inspector grimly, "when the sign is right."

"Curly's still in the country?" asked Buckshot.

"Curly Jones," Rye Pickett said slowly, "ramrods the Wagon Wrench outfit. He's ranch foreman, and when the round-up starts he's the wagon boss."

"Curly was ridin' the rough string when I left. Delbert Ragsdale's older brother Wayne was ramroddin' the big Wagon Wrench. Wayne Ragsdale was troubled with Stetson fever His hat never fit his swelled head."

Rye Pickett nodded, grinning faintly. "Wayne and Delbert Ragsdale own the Wagon Wrench now. They bought it cheap from the Eastern syndicate that

owned it, after the hard winter a couple of years ago put a bad crimp in all the cow outfits in the country. But they managed to gather and ship enough big native steers that next fall and the follow'in' year, to pay off what they'd borrowed to swing the deal."

"Them Ragsdale boys must be crackerjack cowmen," Buckshot broke a short silence. "The Wagon Rod used to be a mighty big spread. Just the land alone was worth a-plenty. But if the hard winter wiped out the cattle, then how could they gather enough remnants to pay 'er off?"

"That," said Rye Pickett, "is just what the former owners are beginnin' to wonder about. They've even gone to the trouble and expense of hirin' range detectives to do a little prowlin'. One of them range detectives got killed in what Sheriff Del Ragsdale calls a whiskey gunfight. The second feller just got lost somewheres in the badlands and never showed up no more. This Chicago outfit that lost the Wagon Wrench is kinda discouraged. They've run outa range detectives."

There was another silence. Rye Pickett could almost hear the big, tough young Buckshot Britt thinking. His heavy black brows were pulled together in a scowl and he lifted his hat and scratched his thick mop of wiry black hair.

"I bet there's somethin' crooked went on," Buckshot finally decided.

"That seemed to be the general opinion of them Chicago owners, son. But a law-court demands actual proof. The Wagon Wrench wasn't shippin' as many carloads of steers as they should have, even datin' back five years ago. They got suspicious then and hired a man to kinda check up on things. One of 'em come out from Chicago to talk it over with me, me bein' the sheriff at the time.

"He asked me who would be a good man to kinda watch what was goin' on. Told me to use my own judgment and hire that man. Which I did. And I got reason to think that the man I hired for the job had just about all the proof they needed when he was killed. And I was bushwhacked and shot up so bad it was a year before I could fork a horse again. . . . The man I hired for that dangerous job, son, was your daddy, the gent known as Horse Thief Britt."

It took all of half a minute for that to sink in. When it did, Buckshot Britt grunted like he'd been kicked in the belly.

"You mean," he said huskily, "that my dad *wasn't* stealin' horses when he was killed?"

"Horse Thief Britt," said Rye Pickett, "was playin' the game after his own fashion. He said it took a thief to ketch a thief. How much he throwed in with a horse thief gang don't cut much ice. The few horses that was bein' moved outa the country was like a little two-bit, penny ante game goin' on out in front to hide the big high stake game in the back room. It was supposed to keep the sheriff, meanin' me, kinda busy tryin' to ketch them two-bit horse thieves. While back in that blind canyon behind Horse Thief Britt's place on Big Blacktail, some brand artists was workin' the Wagon Wrench iron on a lot of cattle. Changin' it into half a dozen other brands that was registered under fake names in Montana and Wyoming.

"I pretended to hunt horse thieves. I never rode near them hidden corrals and brandin' chutes in the blind canyon in the badlands.

"Horse Thief Britt sent me word that it was time to spring the big trap. I had the bench warrants made out and in my chaps pocket. Me'n Horse Thief Britt was playin' it between us, without ary help. Which proved to be our sad mistake.

"Somethin' went wrong, somewheres. If Horse Thief Britt went back to hittin' the likker jug, that mighta bin it. Anyhow the thing blowed up in our faces like a powder keg set off by a cigarette dropped by accident. Horse Thief Britt got killed. I got shot up bad. Horse Thief Britt's kid got run outa the country so's he couldn't talk if he did happen to suspect anything."

"I knew there was corrals and a brandin' chute in the blind canyon," said Buckshot Britt. "I'd sneaked up there of a moonlight night and watched 'em brandin' cattle. But I never told anybody. I was scared my dad was mixed up in it. I watched 'em shove big drives of cattle

acrost the Missouri River at night. But I never told nobody."

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THE old cattleman nodded. "So Curly Jones run you off instead of killin' you. And you know what you're up against, now that you've come back. You won't git a runnin' chance this time. And if ever they find out you've throwed in with me, they'll be gunnin' for you. Right here and now is where you better drift back down the trail, son. That's the best advice I know how to give you—before you die of the same kind of lead poison that killed Horse Thief Britt."

But even as he talked, Rye Pickett knew that he was just wasting his breath. Buckshot was shaking his head.

"I'm kinda bull-headed, sir," he grinned. "I bought back into the game back yonder, when I tried out this new saddle gun. But you better tell me what there is to know. I'm no hand at figgerin' out anything."

"When I was able to git around," said Rye Pickett, "I'd lost my sheriff's job. The two Ragsdale brothers had bought the Wagon Wrench outfit and Curly Jones was ramroddin' it. Del Ragsdale was the new sheriff and the only law in the county. His deputies take his orders.

"There's no more corrals or brandin' chutes in the blind canyon. No need for 'em. No need for them other brands that was 'sold' to the new Wagon Wrench. I was broke and out of a job. Then them Chicago fellers got in touch with me. They got the Cattlemen's Association to hire me as stock inspector. Banked money in my name for a big expense account. Told me to hire men if I needed help. But up till now I ain't spent a dollar of it. There was no use wastin' money hirin' men who would sell out to the Ragsdales. Up till now I've worked alone, and got nowheres. But this evenin' I got careless, and you seen what kind of a jackpot you got me outa.

"That gun-shy horse is what Curly Jones staked me to when I stopped at the Wagon Wrench home ranch for a

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fresh mount. Curly was hollerin' his head off about a bunch of horse thieves that had come through last night and run off a bunch of their top horses. I swallered that yarn with a little salt. But I half way hoped I'd ketch one of the horse thief gang that would talk if I scared him bad enough."

"You give the orders," said Buckshot Britt. "I'll carry 'em out the best I know how. I don't want ary pay. I'm just reppin' for Horse Thief Britt."

They approached the log cabins and pole corrals with their guns in their hands, riding slowly and investigating every black shadow, circling the place cautiously before they stabled their horses.

Shorty, the Wagon Wrench cowpuncher who had been staying at the horse camp, Rye Pickett said, was too dead to do any more gun-harm.

They took care of their horses, then Buckshot Britt cooked supper while Rye Pickett stretched out on one of the bunks. His two bullet rips were not dangerous but they were giving him a lot more pain than he let on, and he had lost a good deal of blood. Buckshot said the coffee would have plenty of whiskers and a kick like a mule.

Rye Pickett watched the husky young cowhand as he moved around the candle-lit cabin. Buckshot moved fast and easy for a two hundred pound man. He'd be a tough hombre to whip in any kind of a rough and tumble fight.

But what really interested Rye Pitckett was Buckshot's reactions to his return to the horse camp he had been scared away from five years ago. The way he would remember little trivial details, such as the roof being patched in that corner where the heavy rains always leaked through, or how the new sheet-iron camp stove, was in a different place and took an extra joint of stovepipe. It did not draw so good with that extra joint of pipe, he said, as if musing aloud, as the old stove did. His was a boy's-retentive memory.

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STEAK and fried spuds. Beans, hot biscuits and strong black coffee. And after supper, he heated water and dressed Rye Pickett's bullet wounds and found him some clean clothes in one of the canvas warsacks.

It looked to Pickett like three or four men had been staying here. There were three tarp-covered bedrolls and four warsacks filled with cowpuncher belongings. They emptied the contents of the warsacks and examined what letters they found among the socks and shirts and under wear and shaving gear. Rye Pickett studied the tally book in the dead Shorty's warsack. Besides the tally of the Wagon Wrench horses in the big pasture, there was a tally of calves he had branded here in his spare time. A couple of pages devoted to the money he had coming at forty a month wages, plus lump sums of three and four hundred dollars, marked, "Paid in Cash." And against this credit balance that covered a period of several months were debit items; clothes, tobacco and a saddle he had bought from the store at the Wagon Wrench home ranch. And, dated during the past couple of weeks items were listed under the head of poker:

> Dropped $175.00 to Joplin. . . . Lost $200.00 to Curly. . . . Slim nicked me for $90.00. . . . Curly took me for $580.00. I throwed the deck in the stove. To hell with it.

Rye Pickett grinned mirthlessly. "Looks like Curly Jones was pokerin' Shorty outa the big money he was makin' from handlin' stolen horses. Joplin and Slim are two of the horse thieves you let ride away. And a man don't have to be smart to figger that Curly was here playin' poker with the same horse thieves he accused of runnin' off his Wagon Wrench horses." He pocketed the tally book, and dropped into a pain-wracked sleep.

Buckshot Britt had pulled off his boots and slept with his clothes on. During the night he got up and stood outside, near the cabin door, listening. From down the river came the sounds of bawling cattle. Rye Pickett was awake.

"Like old times," said Buckshot, when the older man came outside. "Somebody's workin' cattle down the river at the Horse Thief Britt place."

From the brush a hundred yards away a gun cracked. The bullet whined between them. The saddle gun in Rye

Pickett's two hands cracked twice, though the gun lifted no higher than his belt. They heard brush threshing and a choked groan and a riderless horse snorted and whirled and sidled off crabwise, dragging trailing bridle reins.

Two other guns spat jets of flame from behind the brush. Rye Pickett and Buckshot Britt crouched in the black shadow of the cabin wall and shot at the spurts of gunfire. There was a high pitched, nasal scream of agony, then the thud of a falling body and another horse quit the brush with an empty saddle. The third man made a run for it but Rye Pickett's carbine knocked him from his saddle. The man was dead when he struck the ground.

"They had to die some time," growled Rye Pickett.

He identified the three dead men as the horse thieves Buckshot had let get away with bullet-nicked hides. He said that the three renegades were scared to face Curly Jones and the two Ragsdale brothers with the story of their failure to kill Rye Pickett. So they had bushed up here and waited for Rye and Buckshot to come out of the cabin, but the moonlight and black shadows had made their aim uncertain.

He and Buckshot caught and unsaddled the three horses, and identified the three dead men as Wagon Wrench tough cowhands. Horse stealing had been a profitable sideline for them between round-up seasons. They had used the Wagon Wrench horse camp as a safe headquarters. Curly Jones had been pokering them out of their horse thief profits.

"That'll be Curly Jones and some more tough hands workin' them cattle down the river, son. We might as well ride down there."

CHAPTER THREE

Curly Jones Plays His Hand

RYE PICKETT told Buckshot Britt that there was no such thing as honor among horse thieves and cattle rustlers. Once they got the taste of stolen profits their appetite grew until they got tangled up in their own hungry loops. Each man of them feared and mistrusted the others. That same common fear and distrust which banded them together would most likely split them up.

Wayne and Delbert Ragsdale and Curly Jones had worked hand in glove together to steal the Wagon Wrench outfit. They had pinned that sheriff badge on Del's shirt to give them the protection of the law. Now Del and Wayne were trying to freeze out tough Curly Jones. But Curly wasn't easy to freeze out. Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale could not arrest Curly Jones for rustling without involving himself and his brother Wayne in the stealing of the big Wagon Wrench spread.

"They tried to buy Curly Jones out," said Rye Pickett. "But Curly knowed a good thing when he had a tail-holt on it and laughed at 'em.

"Then Wayne and Del tried to run Curly outa the country. But Curly had hired hisself a tough crew of renegades like Shorty an' Joplin an' Slim Smith an' that other dead feller they called Utah —tough cowhands from Robbers' Roost and the Hole-in-the-Wall and Brown's Hole. We just killed off four of 'em.

"Wayne Ragsdale is scared to ride alone of a night. Stays locked in the big log house at the home ranch with a keg of likker and his guns, fear in his yellow heart and with one of Curly's bullets still lodged in his back to remind him that Curly Jones is tougher than a boot.

"Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale keeps his law badge polished. He won't ride outa town or away from the home ranch without his gun-slinger bodyguards he calls his deputies. He ain't as yellow as his brother Wayne but he knows he's out-matched by Curly Jones and them renegades that's helpin' Curly steal Wagon Wrench cattle.

"Curly Jones don't even take the trouble to work the Wagon Wrench brand into any other iron. He trails big herds of Wagon Wrench steers to a Dakota market. His dumpin' ground for stolen cattle is a sizeable ranch there. The Wagon Wrench brand in Dakota is registered under the name of Martin Jones, which is Curly's real name. . . ."

"How long," asked Buckshot, as they rode down the river trail towards the old Horse Thief Britt place, "has this bin goin' on?"

"Since the feed got good in June. Durin' the calf round-up, Curly, wagon-

bossin' the spread, gathered beef steers. When his beef herd was built up, he throwed what he'd gathered down onto the river, and after round-up was over he trailed a big drive of them steers into the Dakota country and left 'em to put on taller there. Now it's late August and he's got a second beef herd built and ready for the trail. He'll drop this herd there in Dakota, gather what stuff he's got there on good feed and plenty water, ship 'em to Chicago, and top the market, like as not.

"And there's nothin' that Wayne and Delbert Ragsdale kin do to stop him without gettin' theirselves throwed in the pen for stealin' the Wagon Wrench outfit from them Chicago owners. Curly Jones wears brand new fifty-dollar 5X beaver hats. The same kind Wayne Ragsdale once had made to order. Curly is ridin' high, wide an' handsome. Calls hisself a cattle king."

"Stetson fever," grinned Buckshot Britt. "Bronc-rider brains."

"You're ketchin' on, son. Pawin' dirt and bellerin' at Sheriff Del Ragsdale, hookin' Del an' Wayne Ragsdale outa his longhorned way is one thing. But I work for the Cattlemen's Association. It's a big outfit. I inspected and passed Curly Jones' other trail herd. Mebbyso it's give him the idee he's gittin' away with this big steal."

"But he hired them four renegades to bushwhack you?"

"Shore thing. Curly don't like me. He keeps a-tryin'. Can't blame him. I'm kinda hard to kill. Looks like Curly and them Ragsdale boys would git plumb discouraged after while. . . . Now let's ride up on that little pinnacle, son. We kin see what there is to see from there."

Rye Pickett said he just wanted to watch what went on down at the river. Curly Jones and his tough renegades would be jumpy and quick-triggered, and the fact that they were working cattle at night showed that Curly was nervous and was rushing things. It was only a couple of days' long drive to the North Dakota line. Tie counted plenty to Curly Jones right now.

"He's gamblin' that them four tough hands of his killed me off. If I ain't there to inspect and pass his trail herd, then Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale will take my place. The sheriff has that legal right in such cases. Or if he hasn't, then they'll just plain bluff it through. It's goin' to give Del Ragsdale a hell of a bellyache to pass on them cattle Curly is stealin' from him and Wayne. But if he gives up head and bellyaches out loud, Curly Jones will send him to the pen. Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale might git desperate enough to make a fight of it. He's got some tough deputies. In that case it'll be a slaughter."

"What'll me'n you be a-doin'?" asked Buckshot.

"Layin' low till the sign is right. Curly Jones is goin' to be worried when his four horse thief amigos don't report to him. That's why we shoved Shorty's dead carcass into that bog hole and hid his saddle. That's why we weighted them other three and dropped 'em into the Missouri River and hid their saddles. Their horses is turned loose. Nobody knows what horses they was ridin' tonight.

"Me'n you stay outa sight. It's goin' to look like I'd bin killed and my carcass hid somewheres in the badlands. Curly will wonder if Sheriff Del Ragsdale and his deputies has killed off Shorty and Joplin and Slim and Utah. But he won't ask about 'em. Not Curly. He's got to keep his worries to hisself. And when a man with the bronc-rider brains that Curly Jones has inside his skull gits to worryin', he's apt to make mistakes that'll leave him wide open for a gut shot. And that's right when me'n you shoot first and ask questions later.

"I don't aim to let Curly Jones know we're alive till we ride up to that herd while it's bein' inspected at the Dakota line. . . . That's why I had to kill that last feller when he tried for a getaway. I just couldn't afford to have him takin' the bad news to Curly Jones."

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RYE PICKETT and Buckshot Britt rode to the top of a pine-covered butte and dismounted. They sat on their hunkers and watched the country blow, taking turns with Pickett's field glasses. It was a bright moonlight night.

Curly Jones and his crew of tough cow-

punchers were crossing a big drive of cattle at the Horse Thief Britt place, where the river was wide and comparatively shallow. Curly had held the cattle back from water all day and he and his cowhands had drifted them to the river bank and let the leaders spread to prevent a pile-up. Before they had drunk their fill the steers were shoved on across and by the time the leaders had filled up on water and been strung out, the swing or middle of the herd was being shoved across.

By the time the drag end was on water, the leaders were strung out along the trail on the far side of the river. Cattle bawled and cowpunchers yipped and shouted as they kept the steers moving. Those men were old hands at moving cattle after dark and they needed no orders to tell them what to do or how to get the job done.

Even from a distance old Rye Pickett and Buckshot Britt could understand and appreciate the cowpuncher savvy of those cattle rustlers, and right now they had nothing but hearty admiration for Curly Jones and his renegade cowhands. Rye Pickett put it into words. . . .

Maybe too many broncs had jarred Curly's brains, but he was a top cowhand. And it seemed a damned shame that top cowhands like that had to drift down the Outlaw Trail, instead of holding down honest forty a month jobs with an honest outfit.

Rustler wages never did men like that any good. Just a few dollars more to spend for booze or lose to some lily-fingered tinhorn gambler when they hit town. Money was just something for a cowpuncher to spend, anyhow. Men held down soft jobs with short hours and big wages in town. A cowpuncher got forty a month and his grub and furnished his own bedroll. He worked twelve, sixteen hours out of the twenty-four, at his hard, dangerous job and he endured the hardships of hunger and thirst, summer heat and winter blizzards. But no real cowpuncher would ever work at anything else.

All he asked for was a string of good horses to ride and enough plain grub to take the wrinkles out of his belly. Weeks and months without seeing town. Then paint 'er red and ride back to camp with empty pockets. What good was rustler wages to men of that cowpuncher breed? Rye Pickett asked.

Some quit honest jobs and turned rustler just for the excitement of it. Others got into trouble of some kind and had to take the Outlaw Trail. A few, like the Ragsdales and Curly Jones, were born to like that cattle rustling life. They wanted to own a big outfit and their own brand. When they were crowded, they killed. And when you've traveled the tough trail that far you can't turn back. But you keep looking back across your shoulder when you ride on, and your hand never gets far away from a gun, until the law catches up.

Most cowpuncher outlaws die with their boots on. Some get sent to the pen and die there like caged wolves. A few get pardoned out after their wild spirit is broken and their muscles are no longer rawhide and they are more to be pitied than the dead because their guts are gone and their eyes are shadowed and they've forgotten how to grin.

"I'd rather kill a cowpuncher outlaw," finished Rye Pickett, "than send him to the pen." And he lit his stub of cigarette.

Dawn was graying the sky when they watched the drag end of the shuffle out of sight in the badlands on the far side of the river. They got on their horses and rode down to the little ranch called the Horse Thief Britt place. Buckshot had been born there.

The graves of his mother and father were there. And because they had seen the last of Curly's men ride away from there, they knew that the ranch was deserted, and it would be the safest place they could hide out for a while.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Death Warmed Over"

PART of Rye Pickett's reasoning when he sized up the Ragsdales and Curly Jones and the general lay of the land, was hard-headed horse sense based on cold facts. He had outlined it plainly enough for young Buckshot Britt.

It was true that Wayne Ragsdale and his younger brother Delbert had used Curly Jones to do most of the actual dirty

work when they gutted the Wagon Wrench range, hid out and fed Wagon Wrench cattle during the hard winter, then bought the big outfit for rock bottom price and payed out on a stolen shoestring deal.

Curly Jones had been tough enough and reckless enough to take most of the big risks and do most of the dangerous work. While Wayne Ragsdale figured it out on paper and did the bulk of the shrewd and cunning and crooked brain work. And Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale and his new law badge covered them with his legal protection.

Wayne and Del Ragsdale had counted on getting rid of tough Curly Jones, one way or another, when they had the big Wagon Wrench cattle outfit in their sack. But Curly slanted his 5X beaver Stetson on his curly rust-colored head, stood on his short, saddle bowed legs and told the two Ragsdale brothers he wanted nothing less than a half interest in the Wagon Wrench outfit.

Wayne Ragsdale, a little drunk and his temper white hot, had made a gun play of it. Curly's bullet had hit him in the side and lodged in the muscles of Wayne's back. And as he lay there on the floor in the log building called the office, there at the home ranch, fear of death glazing his eyes, both hands pressed against the blood flow of the bullet hole, the fight gone out of him, Curly Jones had turned his smoking six-shooter on Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale.

"Wayne checks the bet to you, Del," Curly Jones had grinned flatly, "Feel lucky?"

Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale hadn't wanted to die. He had lifted both hands to the level of his wide shoulders and told Curly Jones to put away his gun. But there was no note of fear in his voice.

"We got to stick together, Curly, or we'll all wind up in the pen. We need each other now. If you kill me, you're killin' a law officer. You've got a tough rep. The Law I represent will hang you higher than a kite. Rye Pickett will move in fast to reclaim the Wagon Wrench for them Chicago dudes. If you can't figure that out, then you're thicker skulled than a work ox. Without Wayne's brains and my law protection, you'll lose the Wagon Wrench. Now get a doctor. If Wayne Ragsdale dies, you'll hang for murder. Get goin', Curly."

"Sign over a half int'rest in the outfit."

With Wayne Ragsdale lying there on the pine board floor in a pool of blood, Curly Jones and Delbert Ragsdale faced one another.

Curly Jones' gun was in his hand. Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale lowered his hands slowly and hooked his thumbs in his sagging cartridge belt. He showed no sign of pity for his wounded brother, as he watched Jones lose his self-confidence as the reality of his position registered in his slow-moving brain.

"I'll never sign over any part of the Wagon Wrench to you, Curly," Delbert Ragsdale followed his advantage. "You'll work for wages. They'll be big wages and it'll never be anything but fightin' pay you'll draw and I'll see that you earn every damned dollar of it. Wayne is bleedin' like a stuck pig. If you don't want to hang for murder, fetch the doctor from town. I'm the only Law here, mister. Don't ever forget that again."

Curly Jones had fetched the doctor from town. And he had hidden out in the badlands until he got word that Wayne Ragsdale was not going to die. He never again brought up the question of wanting a half interest in the Wagon Wrench outfit. Because while he was hidden out in the badlands waiting for Wayne Ragsdale to die or get well, Curly had camped with some renegades from the Outlaw Trail and had talked things over with them and planned a rustler campaign that would clean out the two Ragsdales.

Curly Jones was putting that rustler plan into action. Wayne Ragsdale had a bullet lodged in his back and the doctor had warned him against making any hard rides. He had used whiskey to deaden the pain and had never taken the trouble to quit the booze.

When Delbert told him that Curly Jones was stealing cattle, Wayne grinned twistedly and said to give Curly enough rope and the bronc rider would hang himself.

Wayne Ragsdale had too much contempt for common cowhands ever to drink

with them at a saloon bar or from a pocket bottle on the range. He wore tailored shirts and pants and shaved every morning and trimmed his own thick black hair. Even on the round-up at night he was never too tired to take a bath in the creek or water hole where the wagons camped. But he was the best roper and all-around cowman in the country. He drank the best rye whiskey and bought it by the keg.

He smoked long, thin cigars he had made to order. He had never been known to give any man one of them. Wayne Ragsdale had no friends. Even his own brother disliked him. Wayne Ragsdale was as cold blooded as a rattlesnake. And as dangerous. But Wayne Ragsdale was afraid to die.

Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale hired a half dozen deputies. They were imported mostly from the southwest where each of them had gained a tough reputation as a gun fighter. But he used them as personal bodyguards whenever he rode away from town or from the Wagon Wrench home ranch. Del Ragsdale made no bones about admitting the fact that he was afraid to ride alone, even in broad daylight.

Curly Jones or some of Curly's renegades would bushwhack him, he explained openly and without any acknowledgment of personal cowardice, if he did not have tough gun-slingers to protect him. And who, he would ask flatly, wanted to be murdered?

★

RYE PICKETT called the two Ragsdale brothers yellow cowards. A good portion of the cow country shared Rye's viewpoint. Curly Jones went even further than that. He bragged about his own toughness and branded the Ragsdale brothers as a pair of yellow bellied coyotes, thereby under-estimating their dangerous qualities.

Curly Jones was just a tough broncfighter whose taste of power had gone to his head like too much forty-rod whiskey. But the grizzled Rye Pickett should have known better than to let himself believe that Curly Jones had Wayne and Del Ragsdale licked and cowed. That very taint of coward blood made the two Ragsdale brothers all the more dangerous. Because they were using a wolfish cunning in their fight to hold the Wagon Wrench.

Delbert and Wayne Ragsdale were at the home ranch making war medicine when one of Del's gun-slinger deputies rode in. The deputy had been told to cold-trail Rye Pickett, stay out of sight, and bring back an accurate account of everything that happened to the grizzled stock inspector who had ridden away from the Wagon Wrench home ranch on a gun-shy horse.

This deputy was an expert at that kind of job. The verbal report he made left out no detail.

When the man had gone and the two brothers were alone in the ranch office, Wayne Ragsdale poured himself a still drink, corked the bottle without offering it to his brother, and downed the straight whiskey.

"Horse Thief Britt's whelp," said Wayne Ragsdale flatly. "That kid he called Buckshot. I told you and Curly to kill the brat, five years ago."

"And I told you what the cow country would do if a bald-faced kid was killed. Even a tough country like this protects its women and kids."

Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale reached for the bottle, pulled the cork with his big teeth, spat it out on the desk and drank from the bottle. His brother Wayne scowled his disgust, opened a drawer in the rolled topped desk, and took out a sealed bottle and a corkscrew. Del grinned faintly and hung onto the bottle he had drunk from. He got a certain amount of pleasure taunting his finicky brother with uncouth tricks.

"I never asked," said Wayne Ragsdale, twisting in the corkscrew, "which of you killed Horse Thief Britt. Or if both you and Curly did the job. I still don't want to know a damn thing about it. But whoever did the job had better watch out for this Buckshot Britt."

"Curly told the kid that Rye Pickett killed his old man."

"He evidently didn't make his lie stick. Young Buckshot has thrown in strong with Pickett. That means they've both got to be killed. They're watchin' Curly Jones. Now's the time for you and your high-

priced deputies to ride down there to the Horse Thief Britt place and finish the job Curly's tough hands couldn't get done."

Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale shook his head and took another drink from the bottle.

"Better cut out that booze," he told Wayne, "it's slowin' your brain down. Pickett's playin' possum. He aims to lay low till that trail herd reaches the Dakota line. Then he'll ride up with Buckshot Britt to back his play, and hold up that Wagon Wrench herd."

"Curly Jones is ramroddin' the outfit, but he can't trail a herd of Wagon Wrench cattle across the Montana line into North Dakota or anywhere else across the line without a written order from the Wagon Wrench owners. Curly won't find out till Stock Inspector Rye Pickett stops that herd from crossin' into North Dakota. Curly Jones will make a gun fight of it. And when the gunsmoke clears away there will lie Rye Pickett and Buckshot Britt and Curly Jones and the most troublesome and ornery members of Curly's renegade outfit, deader than hell."

Wayne Ragsdale pulled the cork from his bottle and poured himself a stiff drink. Then put the corked bottle back in the drawer and shut the drawer.

"What makes you so certain they'll all be so dead, Del?" he asked flatly.

"We'll be there, Wayne, to mop up after the gun-ruckus. In case Curly or Rye Pickett or this tough young Buckshot Britt are still alive and sufferin' from their wounds, we'll be on hand to put 'em out of their misery."

Wayne Ragsdale smiled thinly and lifted his glass. "It's about time those high priced gun-slingers of yours earned their fightin' pay."

Del Ragsdale grinned and shook his head. "No outsiders this time, Wayne. We're keepin' this deal a strictly family affair. You and me. I'm payin' off my deputies and sendin' 'em back where I got 'em from. You've bin round-sidin' here too long, Wayne. It's time you taken an active share in the Wagon Wrench outfit."

"Any kind of a rough ride," scowled Wayne Ragsdale, "is liable to move that slug in my back. It's too close for even a top hand doctor to operate on. A quick jolt might kill me or paralyze me for life. No, by the hell, you take your tough deputies and get the job done right. Deal me out."

"If that's the way you want it, Wayne. Curly did most of the dirty work, to start with. Then you handed me a share of it. Like you hand me this moppin' up job. But Rye Pickett's a tough old hellion to kill. He might come through that gun ruckus alive. And if ever Rye Pickett was to find out that it was Wayne Ragsdale who bushwhacked him and left him for dead five years ago, Rye Pickett might ride here to the Wagon Wrench home ranch and kill you like he'd shoot a hydrophobia wolf. . . . If I was you, Wayne, I'd take a chance of dislodgin' that slug in your back."

Some of Wayne Ragsdale's whiskey slopped from the glass on its way to his mouth.

"You can't prove I shot Pickett five years ago. Nobody can prove it. Nobody saw me. I was laid up in bed with a broken leg. Nobody, not even that blackmailin' Curly can prove it."

"If I told Rye Pickett," said Del Ragsdale quietly, "he wouldn't ask for proof. Any man kin ride a few miles with his leg in a plaster cast. Till now, it was just a wild guess on my part. But you just let it slip when you said nobody saw you.

"Better take another drink, Wayne. You look green around the gills. Then figure up the time those deputies of mine have comin' on their Wagon Wrench fightin' payroll and make out their checks in full. From now on you're takin' their place."

Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale got up from his big rawhide backed chair and carried the bottle with him when he left the office. His silver spurs jingled, and he rubbed the law badge pinned to his flannel shirt with the heel of his hand.

"Wayne is figgerin' out your time, boys," he told his half dozen tough deputies. "I'll be over at the bunkhouse with a bankroll big enough to cash your pay checks. I'll dig up a jug and a deck of cards and if any of you boys feel your sportin' blood heatin' up, we'll deal a few hands of stud. Last night for you curly wolves to howl. I'm givin' you your tickets back home for a bonus."

"Who'll keep Curly Jones off your

back, Del?" grinned one of the tough deputies.

"Brother Wayne is broke out with a rash of toughness and says he's all the protection I need. He's bellyached ever since I hired you boys. Miserly. Never bought a drink in his life. See you later, at the bunkhouse."

One of the tough deputies said later, when they were deep in Del's poker game, that when he made out their checks, Wayne Ragsdale looked for all the world like Death warmed over.

CHAPTER FIVE

Supper in Hell!

CATTLE bawled, cowpunchers shouted, dust clouded up from the newly constructed stockyards. The last of the big native steers were penned. Dust-powdered cowhands rode their leg-weary horses to the round-up wagons on the river bank. Wolfed down grub and swallowed strong black coffee and changed horses and rode back to the yards.

Curly Jones had eyed Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale and his brother Wayne with a mixture of hard-bitten defiance and cold suspicion.

"Where's your nursemaids, Del?" he asked when the two brothers rode up. "You look plumb naked without 'em."

Delbert Ragsdale grinned flatly. "I don't need 'em any more, Curly. Me'n Wayne are reppin' for John Law. Where's Stock Inspector Rye Pickett?"

Curly's bloodshot green eyes were like glass. "I heard somethin' about Pickett gittin' drygulched. You're reppin' for the big John Law. In a tight, a sheriff takes the place of a stock inspector. There's the cattle. Look 'em over an' turn 'em loose. They're losin' taller here in the yards. Herd's clean as a hound's tooth. Nary a stray. Sign the inspection papers, Sheriff. And we'll open the gates."

"Where's the Dakota stock inspector?" asked Wayne Ragsdale, his eyes hard.

"Bedded down with his head under 'im," grinned Curly Jones, "with an empty quart bottle for a pillow. Sign them clearance papers, Wayne. No need keepin' these steers penned all day."

"Crowd 'em through the chute," Del snapped, "an' Sheriff Delbert Ragsdale will see if your herd is clean. And the Ragsdale boys will tally their Wagon Wrench steers."

Curly's bloodshot green eyes narrowed. "Legal as hell, ain't yuh?"

Del Ragsdale rubbed his law badge and nodded. "Until Stock Inspector Rye Pickett shows up, I'm in charge here."

"Pickett won't show up. Quit stallin', Del. Clear these cattle." Curly's voice was saw-edged.

"Stock Inspector Rye Pickett will show up, Curly. With a new man he's hired—feller named Buckshot Britt. Horse Thief Britt's kid, growed up bigger'n a skinned mule and tough as a boot. If Shorty and Joplin and Slim and Utah wasn't too dead to talk, they'd tell you that Rye Pickett and Buckshot Britt is playin' for keeps. . . . Got a gut-ache, Curly?"

"You're lyin', Del."

"Don't take my word for it, Curly. That rides like Rye Pickett, comin' yonder. The big feller with him will be Buckshot Britt. He don't look much like the slim kid you scared outa the country, does he? Rye Pickett told me not long ago that he knowed Curly Jones had killed Horse Thief Britt. That me'n Wayne hired you to do the drygulch job. Like as not he's told Buckshot who killed his old man. Nice day we're havin' for the big showdown, Curly."

FROM THE CANADIAN LINE down to the cattle-country along the Rio Grande, you'll find that real ranchers and working cow-hands vote these man-sized stories by Walt Coburn "Aces" in the fiction-deck! Read his smashing novelette, "Tough Hands Wanted!" in the current DIME WESTERN. Buy it today at your newsstand!

Curly Jones licked his sun-cracked lips. He was watching Rye Pickett and Buckshot as the two riders reined up to talk to Curly's tough riders just outside the stockyards.

Rye Pickett had taken some papers from his pocket and was holding them in one hand, slapping them against the palm of his other hand as he talked. Buckshot Britt sat his saddle, his weight in his left stirrup, his hand on his six-shooter.

Rye Pickett shoved the papers back into his pocket, as Curly's men loped back to the round-up wagon. Then he and Buckshot Britt rode at a running walk around the filled stockyards and towards the empty chute where Curly Jones and the two Ragsdale brothers sat their horses.

Curly Jones' face was so drained of color that the big freckles showed black through the dust on his cheeks. In a croaking whisper he cursed his tough cowhands who had deserted him, riding to camp and leaving him alone with the two Ragsdale brothers.

Delbert Ragsdale shifted in his saddle and cut an uneasy look at his brother. That desertion of Curly's renegade crew was upsetting his plans.

A twisted grin pulled at Wayne Ragsdale as he said tonelessly, "That bullet in my back shifted about an hour ago. For a second it felt like a knife in my back, then the pain was gone. It left me dead from the waist down. You did that to me, Curly, and you'll be in hell for supper, with me feedin' you hot chunks. Looks like you paid off your gun-slingers a day early, Delbert. You need 'em almighty bad."

Wayne Ragsdale always carried a quart flask of whiskey. Its screw top was a two ounce metal cup. He unscrewed it now, filled it, and drank. He drained it again, screwed the top back on and shoved the bottle into his chaps pocket. His right hand slid down to the butt of his holstered six-shooter.

Stock Inspector Rye Pickett and Buckshot Britt rode up within twenty feet of Curly Jones and the two Ragsdale brothers, their hands on their guns. Rye Pickett's eyes were as cold blue as ice.

"I've got bench warrants for the three of you men. I've packed 'em a long time. I'm arrestin' you three men for the murder of Deputy Sheriff James Britt, better known as Horse Thief Britt. His son John, called Buckshot, will testify on the stand as an eye-witness to the murder. Perjury in a just cause. Any judge and jury will believe this young feller's story. It'll hang you high, gentlemen. Will you throw away your guns, or gamble on the draw?"

"Let's talk it over in hell, Pickett." And Wayne Ragsdale's six-shooter was belching flame as it came from its holster.

But something of the paralysis had crept into his arms and hands and his draw was slow and his aim bad. The bullet missed Rye Pickett's belly by inches. The spewing gun in Rye's gnarled hand didn't miss. Its bullet tore into Wayne Ragsdale's chest. Wayne's gun exploded a second time before it slid from his hand and he slumped limply across his saddle horn.

Buckshot Britt and Curly Jones were shooting at one another as fast as they could thumb back their gun-hammers. Their horses were trying to pitch or stampede, and some of their shots were missing.

★

RYE PICKETT wasn't forking any gun-shy horse now. He was riding his own private horse that was steady as a wooden horse in front of a saddlemaker's shop. There was a faint grin on his leathery face and every time he pulled the trigger his gun sent a slug into Del Ragsdale's thickset body.

One of Del's bullets had creased Rye's ribs and another had gone higher and torn a hole in the grizzled stock inspector's sweat marked hat. And when Del Ragsdale kept shooting, Rye Pickett took deliberate aim and the bullet drilled a black hole below Del Ragsdale's right eye.

Buckshot Britt was hard hit. He was reeling in his saddle like a drunken man and his shots were going wild. His grin was a ghastly grimace in a blood-smeared mask. He spurred his horse blindly into Curly Jones' mount, and there was a wild tangle of men and horses. Buckshot's gun jammed hard into Curly's belly and the explosion of the fired gun was muffled. Curly slid loosely to the ground and landed with a lifeless thud.

Rye Pickett crowded his horse alongside Buckshot's and lifted the big, husky young cowhand from the saddle. He eased him to the ground like a pick-up man lifting a bronc-rider from his pitching horse after the timer's gun cracked.

Rye Pickett worked with a surgeon's skilled speed to get the blood stopped where Curly's bullets had ripped Buckshot's shoulder and thigh. Another bullet had cut a shallow furrow along Buckshot's cheek.

Buckshot Britt lay there, grinning through gritted teeth. His horse was still trying to buck from under its empty saddle.

"You was right, sir. I'd have done better on a gentle horse. But that Curly was always tellin' me I was a sorry bronc-rider. And it give him a jolt to see me forkin' that sorrel bronc you said had throwed Curly so many times he was scared to go into the corral with it now. Curly bragged he never rode nothin' but Broncs. But I got 'im, didn't I? I killed the curly headed son that murdered my dad!"

"And he grabbed a sizeable lunch while you got a meal. Lay still, son. I kin feel that slug here in your thigh." Rye Pickett opened the long, sharp-pointed jackknife blade.

"This'll hurt a little. Hang onto your hat!"

"Let 'er rip!" gritted Buckshot Britt, clenching his jaws.

When he had Buckshot's wounds dressed and bandaged, Rye Pickett mounted his horse and rode out from the stockyards where the big spooked steers bawled and milled. He took off his hat and waved it over his head.

The tough cowhands waiting at camp were spurring their horses to a run before Rye's hat was back on his grizzled head.

When they rode up, Rye Pickett took a sheaf of John Doe bench warrants from his chaps pocket and touched a lighted match to them.

"Drift them cattle back onto feed and water, boys," he told them. "You kept your words. I'm a-keepin' mine. You got your Wagon Wrench jobs as long as you kin stand workin' for Buckshot Britt. You, Tex, run the wagon till Buckshot gits mended. He's tough enough to be ramroddin' the spread when you git this gatherment shipped and them Dakota steers gathered and on the train. . . . We'll load Curly Jones and the two Ragsdale boys in the bed-wagon and haul 'em to town. Give 'em a whiskey burial. They died with their boots on."

Buckshot Britt rode to town in the bed-wagon. Rye Pickett, on his private horse, riding as wagon pilot, stopped in front of his house at the edge of town.

A slim young lady with thick black curly hair and sky blue eyes came running down the path to the gate in the white fence.

Rye Pickett swung a little stiffly from his saddle and took her in his arms. Her hug hurt his bandaged ribs, but he didn't wince.

"We got company, Abbie. But it'll be a day or two before he gets his appetite. He got mussed up a little helpin' me git back the Wagon Wrench for them Chicago fellers. . . . Yeah. We made that big bonus they offered. Twenty thousand. Like as not I git back my sheriff badge now. And my young pardner will ramrod the Wagon Wrench. That's him, climbin' down over the front wheel. Growed into a man since he used to pack your books home from school. . . ."

Abbie Pickett let go of her father, slid from his arms and ran over to where Buckshot, his face bandaged, one arm in a sling, stood with his weight on his good leg, leaning against the wheel of the bed-wagon. She grabbed his good hand in both hers. Her eyes shining like bright blue stars. "You darned Buck!"

"You lost your pigtails, Ab," Buckshot grinned.

"Where'n hell's your gumption gone?" growled Rye Pickett. "When I was your age, and a girl looked at me like that, I grabbed 'er and give 'er a hug an' kiss!"

Buckshot Britt found his gumption then, right sudden. . . .

THE END

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A Deacon Bottle Novel

By

Robert E. Mahaffay

That same pitch-black night when the Deacon risked a bullet trying to stop Regal's herd from being rustled, Regal was gunning for that damn' cow-stealing Deacon!

CHAPTER ONE

Midnight Rustlers

IN THE deep blackness Deacon Bottle heard the sound and laid a pudgy fist on the butt of a sixgun. The hot air muffled the distant mutter of hoofs, mak-

THE DEACON

The Deacon was as close to being a dead man as he'd ever get, and he knew it. . . .

ing it somehow ghostly. In the Deacon's nostrils was the smell of woodsmoke.

It was the film of smoke and dust, for a week unstirred by any breeze, which blotted out the stars and made the sky one great sweep of sable.

High up along the ridge the stir of hoofs grew louder. The sharper ring of metal against rock told Deacon Bottle that there was at least one shod horse among the cattle.

Beside him, a steady shape in the night, Lon Mallory said, "This is it, Deacon."

Mallory, hard-hitting superintendent of the hills division, had insisted on coming along in person. The railroad was in trouble—mounting cattle thefts had been laid at the door of its construction crews in Three Wagon Valley.

The Deacon's voice was disturbed. A night as black as blood in the moonlight was a poor night for this kind of job. "Enoch set?" he asked.

Sheriff Enoch Starling was old and wise in the ways of rustlers. He was tough and he was stubborn—maybe too stubborn this time.

"Enoch's holding the canyon," Mallory said. "How long 'fore they get down?"

"Say ten minutes."

"Then I'll shove along. We'll take this bunch or know why, Deacon." Mallory stepped down and moved off, leading his mount.

Deacon Bottle stared after him, letting the shape of this ambush he couldn't see soak through his mind. Starling blocked the canyon over against Bald Ridge. He would make the first contact with the rustlers, crowd them either against the Deacon here on the west trail, or down to Mallory in the notch which opened on the lower brakes.

Deacon Bottle swore grimly. There was too much gamble to a fight staged in these circumstances.

Still, there had been little choice. The tip on the contemplated raid had come to the Deacon in a back room of the Desert Eagle Saloon in Latigo. It had been a slim enough thread to follow—but it had been a good one.

The clatter of hoofs was an increasing cataract of sound, moving down into the jaws of the trap. Probably between one and two hundred head were being taken, the Deacon judged. He strained his eyes against the darkness, but could see nothing.

From a hip pocket he hauled his bandana and wiped at eyes which the film of smoke in the air had irritated. Behind the higher ridges of the North Hills there was a faint touch of red in the black sky.

That was the forest fire which for a week had clawed at the far slope of the hills. Grief of another sort would come boiling into the Latigo range if a change of wind brought the fire across the mountain ridge.

Charley Regal, among others, would be wiped out. But a real menace of that kind, perhaps, would knock some sense into Regal's hard head.

Regal had hated the railroad from the start. Claimed that by using crooked rate schedules a road could smash any rancher it chose to smash. He claimed, more specifically, that railroad hard-cases were stealing his beef. He had two suits pending in the courts.

Deacon Bottle scowled, listening to the rising clatter of cloven hoofs.

Regal was a cattleman of the old school —tough and quick-tempered, but upright as a post. He was a good man and he hired good men. Byron Speece, his foreman, was a little better than good. He ramrodded Regal's Tilted L crew with a heavy and able hand.

Knowing the sound would be drowned by the hoofbeats, Deacon Bottle eared back the hammer of the silver-mounted weapon in his right hand. The scramble of hoofs was a loud rushing sound now. The Deacon's memory gave him a picture of the trail as it swung toward Bald Ridge and the canyon angling off its flank.

He didn't hear Sheriff Enoch Starling's voice issuing a blunt command, but he saw the spearing flame of a revolver shot which was the answer.

At once guns began to pound with a thudding racket. From the spot Deacon Bottle had reckoned as Starling's location, came three quick flashes which were swallowed almost instantly by the blackness. Deacon Bottle watched the spot, saw nothing more. He guessed grimly that Starling had bitten off too much.

The herd, however, had been thrown into confusion. A bullet-raked steer was bellowing. Whether or not the cattle had been turned from the canyon was impossible at first to tell. The sound of their hoofs was a spreading, roiled babble.

The Deacon fingered his gun and swore. This had been wrong from the start, but it was too late to mend it now. He could only wait. To rush into that melee would be both useless and foolhardy.

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GUNS were still banging throatily, tossing lead toward Starling's rocky fort. Down in the notch opening on the brakes Lon Mallory probably was cursing himself hoarse because the fight still was out of reach.

A steer came bolting past the Deacon, crashed off the west trail into the brush. Two or three more came raging out of the blackness, and swept on into the deep night.

The herd had been broken up, right enough. Starling . . . ?

From a little farther to the left than the Deacon had anticipated sprang the unmistakable scrape of a shod hoof. It was

scarcely more than a dozen yards off—a rider coming recklessly at full tilt.

The Deacon roared, "Pull up!" not expecting to be obeyed. His immediate reply was a bright muzzle flash from the charging horseman, and he shot carefully, gauging his height from the splash of color.

There was another spurt of flame, but this one pointed straight down from about the level of a rider's hand, hanging loosely.

The horse rocketed on past. But there was another sound too—the sodden tumbling of a body over and over in brush and loose rocks.

Deacon Bottle kept his eyes turned toward the heart of the battle with the sort of alertness which had kept him alive through gun-fights stretching back over a good many years.

He guessed now that no more riders were coming his way, and he nudged his horse toward the canyon. Mallory had stood all the inaction he could take, and was doing the same. He was shouting Enoch's name between furious oaths.

There still was a blindly surging pack of cattle where the trail forked west and into the canyon, but the last shots of the fight apparently had been fired.

Some of the rustlers probably had got back the way they came; those who should have been pocketed had got past Starling.

Mallory was still calling, and the Deacon answered him. They came together in the close-packed night, and Mallory said bitterly, "Damn it, Deacon, if they nailed Enoch. . . !"

"Maybe not. We'll see."

A short search with matches revealed the old lawman who had been the Deacon's friend for more years than he could remember. He was lying on his belly among the rocks, and when Deacon Bottle turned him over the features of his seamed, gray-mustached face were obscured by the blood pouring from a rip in his forehead at the hair line.

It looked as if the forward part of his skull had been smashed. But when Deacon Bottle proceeded with the task of stopping the blood, the old man brushed at his hand, growled and presently was sitting up.

"Hold still, you leather-headed idiot," instructed the Deacon, annoyance in his voice. He was binding a torn strip of his shirt about the sheriff's head.

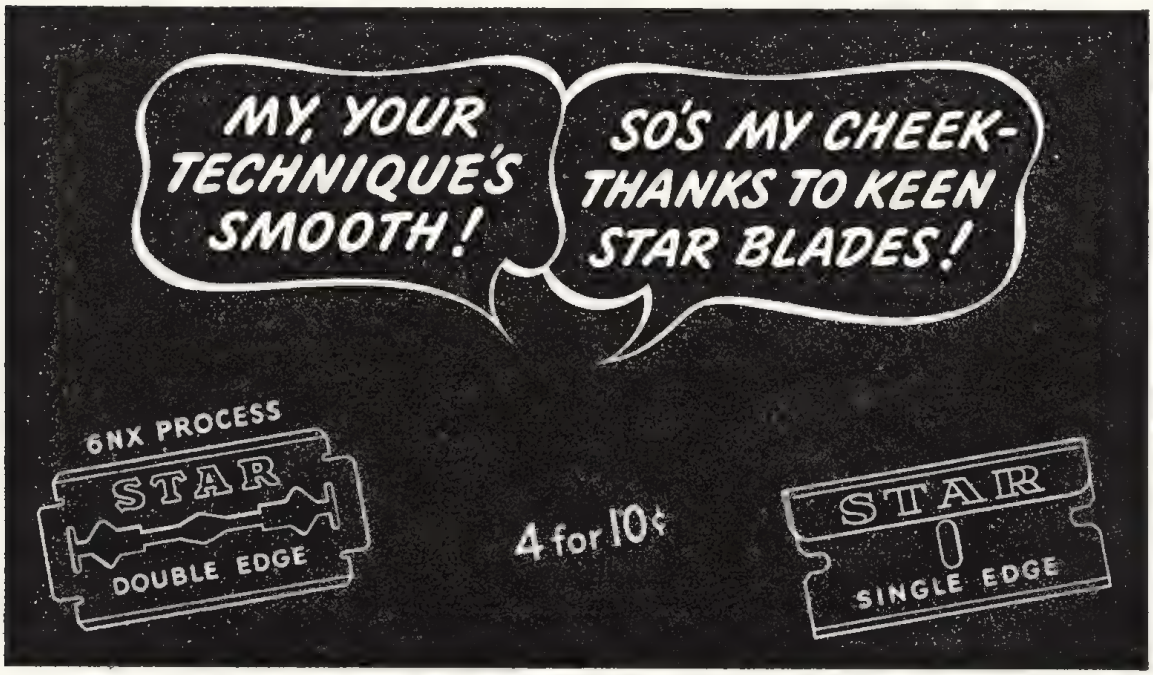
"Got past me—the lot of 'em!" swore Starling in a rage.

"Lucky you ain't dead."

"They shot blind. Lucky they touched me at all," retorted Starling.

Mallory kicked savagely at the gravel with his toe. "Get a look at them?" he wanted to know.

"Not much. They were spotted against that fire glow for maybe a split second. I



saw four, but who they were I wouldn't have any idea."

"Only four?"

"One more, anyhow," said the Deacon.

Mallory said, "Saw you shoot. What happened?"

"Maybe we better find out."

They would have left Starling where he was, but the old man insisted on struggling to his feet. It was his fault, he pointed out—or the fault of a chance slug—that they had empty guns and no meat. The whole job must be done again, with Regal blathering his head off about crooked railroading and worse law enforcement.

"Shut up," grunted Mallory. "You picked the toughest corner. Same thing could have happened to any one of us."

They went back on foot along the west trail from the fork. Deacon Bottle calculated as well as he could the spot he had occupied, but it took considerable groping about in the brush to locate the body of the man who had refused the Deacon's warning and been shot out of his saddle.

The body was wedged into a space between two small pines. Deacon Bottle freed it. Flame from a match held by Lon Mallory glinted against the still-wet shirt front where the Deacon's bullet had hit.

The man's face was young; it was almost a boy's face. His lips were pulled back from his teeth in a kind of desperate grimace, as if all his courage and strength of will were being exerted when he died.

Mallory's match went out, and he lingered a moment over the lighting of another.

It was Starling who exploded, "Great Scott! It's Dave Barlow!"

Mallory was swearing softly under his breath. "We get one, just one out of maybe half a dozen, and it has to be a Regal Tilted L man."

His match flared, and they all looked again at the face which was screwed up with intentness, and which held perhaps a trace of fear.

"If he was runnin' with rustlers on the side, he got what he had comin'," said Starling bluntly. "What Regal may think don't matter."

Mallory grunted. "He'll think and say plenty. This was his stuff. He can claim Dave Barlow got wind of the steal and tried to stop it."

"He can claim hell!" said Starling. "Barlow was smack in the middle of the bunch. He made the mistake of cutting toward the Deacon instead of busting on through the canyon."

Starling waited a while, then added angrily. "Well, Deacon, that's the way of it, isn't it?"

"Could be," the Deacon said. "That could be the way it was. Most likely it is."

"You don't say it like you were sure."

"The hell of it is," Deacon Bottle said, "he came from a little farther to the left than I figured he would. He could have been riding drag an' got scared an' busted off this way. But he could have spotted this deal earlier an' been tailing it. When you started shooting, he could have figured that he'd better get the hell out of the way. He could have started toward me, just to keep clear."

"He tried to plug you first," Mallory snapped. "I saw that."

"What would you have done? Black as the inside of a cow's guts, and a quick choice to make?"

Mallory waited a bit. Although his face was invisible now, it was the blue-jawed, battered face of a fighter. There was a time when Mallory had stood in the corner of a pool room, armed with pool balls, and dared gunmen to take him. He was a fighter, but he was fair.

"All right," he said. "Let's get back. We've done what we could. But we're going to have a hell of a time with Regal."

CHAPTER TWO

Regal Calls it Murder!"

DEACON BOTTLE'S career had been a varied one. He had been accused at one time or another of most recorded crimes. He was a master of gunnery; the twin silver-mounted sixguns belted about his ample hips were famous.

He was famous as well for the preachments he delivered at intervals, generally from the bar of the Desert Eagle Saloon in Latigo after no little fortification with his favorite beverage, Old Pepper whiskey. This liquid was regarded by many as a good substitute for a stump-pulling explosive, but the Deacon found it bracing.

The Deacon was mild of nature, cheerful, opposed to hard work, and a hell of a man in a brawl.

He had attained friendship with Lon Mallory the hard way, having once faced the railroad man across leveled gun-barrels. The result had been that he had taken over the job of trouble-shooter for Mallory's Hills Division.

Trouble there had been in no small degree—ramming a railroad through tough frontier country, mountain country to boot, never has been child's play. Holding it there once the rails have been spiked down is very nearly as bad.

It was the day after the fight that failed in the shadow of Bald Ridge, and Deacon Bottle had his bulky frame wedged in his favorite chair at the Desert Eagle. A quart of Old Pepper, his second, was at his elbow.

Lon Mallory came tramping into the place, his bullet head thrust forward a little, his bulldog jaw set. He dropped into a chair across from the Deacon.

"Regal calls it murder," he said.

Deacon Bottle nodded. The smell of burning timber had permeated even this heavy atmosphere, and he blew his nose into his bandana.

"Regal had to," he said.

"You mean you think he's stealing his own beef?"

"Cripes, no! But he won't let anyone else claim that a Tilted L rider's rustling him."

Mallory looked at the Deacon's bottle of Old Pepper with distaste. He poured out a small drink, downed it gingerly and choked.

"Should have known better," he said. "I keep thinking whoever makes this stuff will run out of broken glass, and it'll improve."

The Deacon's mild blue eyes were undisturbed. "The whiskey people started a deal once to give away a hang rope with every bottle. Didn't work, though. Fellers said they'd take theirs the quick way —just drinking."

Mallory growled something and swung around with the intention of signalling the bartender. He didn't get all the way around. He stopped with his head toward the door.

Through it came two men. Charley Regal was chunky and squat. He had a raw red face, a big nose, thick sandy mustache and sandy hair. He called getting a haircut "de-horning," and permitted it but once every six months.

Byron Speece, his ramrod, was as tall as the Deacon. Though he lacked the Deacon's bulk, he was built as solidly as an oak log. He would have been handsome but his nose had at one time been broken and allowed to heal without being set. There was a peculiar scar along the left side of his jaw—not the clean slash of a bullet or knife; it had been made by a club or boot.

Regal walked with a kind of shambling intentness, his jaw thrust out. His red little eyes, roving bear-like around the dingy interior of the saloon, came to rest on the Deacon. A growl rumbled in his throat.

Speece followed him over, a pace or two to the rear, moving with easy alertness. A man who could move like that, the Deacon reflected, would be smooth and fast with a gun.

Regal planted his feet squarely, and scowled angrily at the Deacon. The cowman was on the prod.

"Deacon," he said, "I'll see you hung if it's the last thing I ever do."

The Deacon said quietly, "Take it easy, Charley. If Dave Barlow had a right to be where he was, we'll find out about it."

"He had every right," Regal snarled. "I had him at the Silver Springs line camp, watchin' for just the long-ridin' deal you railroad hardcases tried to pull off last night!"

"Hold on!" Mallory was angry too. "We took railroad guns in there to save your beef, not to steal it!"

The cattleman shook his fist under Mallory's nose. "Keep out of this, unless it was you murdered Dave. I'll get to you when I'm finished with Deacon Bottle. When I'm ready, I'll see your stinkin' road pulled up by the roots and pitched into the bottom of Hell's Bend Canyon!"

Mallory had got where he was by using his fists and his toughness. Killing temper drove the blood out of his face; a kind of film fell across his eyes.

Deacon Bottle put a pudgy hand on the

railroad man's shoulder. "Quit it, Lon!" He swiveled his head toward Regal.

"Charley, look at this thing straight. There's always trouble when a railroad tackles tough country. Somebody's usin' that trouble to swing a rustling deal that's bigger than a few head picked off here or there. The road's out to block that, same as you are."

"Block it, hell! The railroad's doin' it!" Regal growled.

"Listen!" Deacon Bottle snapped. "No road's going to whittle down the outfits that feed it and keep it running. If Dave Barlow was playing a square game we'll find it out. If he wasn't—if he'd thrown in his gun on a crooked deal—we aim to find that out, too."

From a little behind Regal's shoulder Speece said, almost lazily, "I told you talkin' was no good, Charley."

Deacon Bottle looked sharply at the ramrod, and saw at once what was intended. Speece had come to fight.

"Tell your man," the Deacon said, "that another killing now—him or me—won't settle this."

Speece's handsome eyes were alive with scorn. "Charley, I told you the Deacon was pushin' along on his rep. He can still cut down some kid in the dark, but he shies away from anything tougher."

Deacon Bottle sat very still. The heavy fragrance of wood smoke made his nostrils twitch. A gun-fight now would knock this whole affair beyond the reach of law and order. Starling would be made to look like a fool. Speece was doing what no cattleman in the country would blame him for, if he was right.

If the Deacon won, whispers that railroad gunmen were ruling the country would grow.

Speece laughed. "An old wolf howls big, but it's just noise. Get up on your feet, you night-shooting killer!"

Deacon Bottle said, "Boys, this ain't my gun day. Who'll have a drink?" And reached for the bottle of Old Pepper.

He got his powerful fingers on it and flipped it. The bottle, spinning, hit Speece in the mouth.

The Deacon was out of his chair and in the wake of the bottle with the speed which never failed to deceive those who never had seen his bulk in action.

SPEECE, spitting blood and broken teeth, had sent one hand diving for his holstered gun. The Deacon kicked out, and the toe of his boot smashed against Speece's wrist. The gun flew in an arc, hit a table with a jar that set the gun off. Speece, with a cartridge under the hammer, had come prepared for any kind of a fight.

Deacon Bottle took a split-second to slip the buckles of his gun-belts and heel the weapons back under the table.

Speece came at him with a swift savagery. It was no blind rush. He feinted and slammed home two chopping blows that split the Deacon's lower lip and the skin over his left cheekbone.

The Deacon gripped him around the middle, and the feel of the corded muscles of the man's back told Deacon Bottle what he was up against. Using his greater weight, he lunged over and down, aiming at the pit of Speece's stomach with the point of his shoulder.

Speece writhed just enough to take the driving two hundred-odd pounds on his ribs. Nevertheless, he grunted. Twisting, he thumbed at the Deacon's eye. The fingernail scraped away a chunk of eyebrow.

Deacon Bottle pulled both knees up on the foreman's chest and slammed at his head with both fists. At the third blow his knuckles were bruised and slippery with blood.

Then Speece heaved him off and sprawled after him, his groping hands clamped on one of the Deacon's feet. He wrenched at it with all his strength, and there was a crack of bone. The Deacon's other boot, flailing, crashed against Speece's jaw, knocked loose his hold.

The Deacon climbed to his feet, his face very white. He tried to put his weight on the leg Speece had laid hold of, and it buckled under him and he tumbled awkwardly on his side.

Into the foreman's eyes leaped a look of fierce exultation. He ran at the man on the floor and jumped with spike heels aimed to crush ribs or skull.

One of the Deacon's outflung hands brushed a chair. He gripped it, swung it in front of him. The four legs thrust out like prongs, tripping the ramrod as he came down.

Speece spilled over. His right shoulder crashed into a leg of the table, snapping it off. Down the table came, forming a sort of shield between Deacon Bottle and Speece.

And behind the table, on Speece's side, were the Deacon's guns.

So great was the fury in Speece that he slung one of the silver-mounted weapons around and fired twice, blindly, through the table before anyone could move. Both shots missed.

Lon Mallory jumped in, levered the gun barrel up and back so that Speece had to release it or suffer a broken wrist. Still he was not through. Mallory slapped down with the steel, but it carromed off the foreman's head and thudded harmlessly against his shoulder.

An instant later he and Mallory were struggling for the second gun. Neither of them saw why Deacon Bottle, up on his feet again and able to stand this time, had swung toward the door.

The bat-wings still flapped madly behind the man who had entered. They permitted intermittent glimpses of the horse in the street—legs spraddled out, head down between its knees, lathered sides heaving.

The man was very nearly as badly off as his mount. He was a Tilted L man, Pete Andergord; he had a stubbly two-day growth of black beard. His voice came out in a croaking gasp. "Wind—wind changed!"

He went across to Charley Regal and shook him by the shoulder. The cattleman didn't understand him. He had been watching the fight, every muscle of his red face drawn tight, bitter concentration in his eyes. He brushed at Andergord and shook his head.

Andergord dug in his fingers. His mouth no more than six inches from Regal's ear he shouted, "Fire got across the hump!"

Regal got it that time. His stoniness fled. He snapped, "Where?"

"Wind pulled sparks into the timber by Two Devil Creek. Fire's eatin' fast down the west slope. Maybe we can get stuff out through the gap, but most maybe we can't."

Regal nodded, shaping up the picture. He was a cattleman, and his own life or the life of another didn't matter when his herd was in danger.

He moved fast around the table. He completely disregarded the gun which Mallory had obtained. Mallory had his knee in the small of Speece's back, and the muzzle of the revolver in Speece's left ear.

Regal said harshly, "By, we got to move ever' head out of the hills in the next six hours, or lose 'em! Come on!"

He pushed irritably at Mallory, as if the superintendent were a child who had got heedlessly in the way.

Mallory stepped back. Speece pulled himself upright. If Regal had forgotten, he had not. His face was smeared with blood from the battering he had taken. Pulled-back lips showed the gap left by the teeth he had lost. The whites of his eyes were veined with red; they were sullen and furious.

On the way to the door he stopped, deliberately, and scooped up the sixgun Deacon Bottle had kicked out of his hand.

Lon Mallory began to swear. He came around the table. "Deacon, sounded like that ankle of yours went bust. That damn'—"

But Deacon Bottle was staring at the still swinging doors. "Lon, that man's worth helping!"

"Helping? You mean—?"

"Regal. He's block-headed, but he's got guts, and he's square."

Mallory snorted. "He's the man aims to hang you, Deacon! He'll spend every cent he's got trying to do it, if the fire don't break him."

Deacon Bottle didn't seem to hear. "Call out ever' man-jack you can lay hands on, Lon. No one man counts in this deal. The range an' the railroad both are in the pot—and the fire's holding aces!"

CHAPTER THREE

Into Hell's Bend Canyon

IN LESS than an hour the town of Latigo was stripped of men. Rigs of every description jolted over the trails spreading north into the hills, loaded with men who had no transportation of their own. Railroad crews had been pruned to a skeleton force.

Cass Reed had thrown open his hardware store and watched his stock of shovels cleaned out in five minutes. Blankets had been pulled ruthlessly from beds in the rooms above the honkatonks.

Borne on the wind which came steadily across the hills now was a smothering pall of yellow smoke spiked with cinders. There had been fires before, but always the barren backbone of the North Hills had sealed them off from the Latigo side. This was different.

By three o'clock in the afternoon the magnitude and implications of the blaze began to take shape.

There was a chance, a fair one, that the fire could be blocked at the western end of the timber near Two Devil Creek. A hundred of Red Cassidy's Golden Chance miners, and very nearly as many Latigo townsmen, were backfiring desperately there.

The fire running south, however, was out of hand. Crews bucking it in that section were being forced back over ridge after ridge.

That was the bad part. It meant the fire was rolling unchecked to the east. A dozen ranchers on that side were threatened. Owners were faced with the bitter choice of gambling everything on stopping the fire, or pulling out their herds. If they could get them out.

What made it doubtful was the presence of Hell's Bend Canyon. This deep and narrow slash angled through the hills, forming an impassable southern boundary to the wedge-shaped ranch area.

Because of its presence, the railroad had been forced to swing farther to the south through Three Wagon Valley.

By five o'clock that afternoon it was clear that only a trickle of cattle could be got out through the gap at the western end of Hell's Bend. The rest of the herds—Tilted L included—were pinned between the racing flames and the canyon.

Deacon Bottle's moonlike face was black with soot when he rode back from the fight which had failed to keep a path open at the gap. Behind him was the throaty howl which only a forest fire can make. Smoke had turned his throat raw; it swirled after him now with greedy fingers.

Crews were patrolling the southern lip of Hell's Bend, hoping to hold the fire there, though even that was questionable. He found Lon Mallory grimly assigning blanket brigades to areas where backfires might safely be started.

Mallory had his jaws clamped on a cigar which he lit at intervals and forgot to smoke. He squinted at the Deacon and then north. "Lose the gap?"

"Couldn't hold it. Got to move fast now."

Mallory shrugged roughly. "Deacon, that beef is done for. Every head that isn't out now will never get out."

"Build 'em a bridge," said the Deacon flatly.

Mallory stared at him.

"Pull your construction gangs out of Three Wagon Valley. Get 'em up here," the Deacon said. "You've got rails within a mile of Hell's Bend just below Hat Ridge. Shove your timbers in there. Round up cars to get the herds the rest of the way out, in case the fire jumps Hell's Bend."

"There's no time," Mallory objected, swearing.

"Time?" said the Deacon. "Since when has time got so God-awful important?"

Mallory grinned. "Can do, Deacon. Get your beef to Hat Ridge and we'll get it across." He turned and ran for his horse.

For three miles Deacon Bottle rode east along the lip of the canyon. There he dismounted and let himself down into the notch where the sheer side had crumbled away. It was a trail impossible for a horse or a steer, and next to impossible for a man.

More than an hour later, hands raw and bleeding, he crawled up on the north side of the canyon and struck out through the smoky timber. Regal, he judged, having found the gap closed, would drive southeast, hoping against hope that some miracle would keep the fire from overhauling him.

The hope was forlorn, but Regal wouldn't quit until he had proven it so.

Presently there was the crashing of a horse in the underbrush. Deacon Bottle shouted. A rider swung into sight, pulled up. He was Tilted L, a squat, heavy-shouldered man named Bailey, and when

he recognized the Deacon he scowled.

The fire made a sullen roaring sound in the background.

"Get me to Regal," the Deacon said.

Bailey swung his mount around. "Go to hell!"

Deacon Bottle lifted a sixgun from its holster. "Right now!"

Bailey eyed the gun and the Deacon and shrugged. Deacon Bottle hauled himself up behind the saddle. The horse already had been driven hard, and made heavy going of it. He labored across a pair of low ridges, through a stand of timber and into a clearing which held a ranch house, sheds and corrals.

Through the murk of smoke and windborne ashes and twilight, a knot of men could be seen at one of the corrals.

Regal, his red face sagging and beaten beneath its coating of grime, was saddling a fresh horse. With him were five of his Tilted L crew, among them Byron Speece.

Speece had finished bolting on his saddle. On the verge of stepping into it he stopped, moved a pace or two away, stood spread-legged with his hands on his hips. The expression on his broken-nosed, scarred face was heavy with malevolence.

Deacon Bottle heaved himself down.

Behind him, still mounted, Bailey said instantly, "Don't move, Deacon, or I'll blow your head in two." Without looking, the Deacon knew he held a gun, and meant it.

Regal raised his head. He peered at the Deacon for some time, as if trying to place him, then went on pulling up his cinch because that mattered more to him.

Speece said coolly, "Give it to him, Bailey. There'll be nothin' left after the fire crosses here."

Regal heard it too, and understood it, for he lifted his eyes again.

The middle of the Deacon's back crawled, but he didn't look around. He said, "Your beef is as good as out, Regal. But we got a way fixed across Hell's Bend."

As clearly as if it were a sound, he sensed Bailey's finger easing off the trigger.

Regal licked his lips. "There ain't any way across Hell's Bend."

"Mallory has his construction gangs in there," the Deacon said. "They're going to bridge it just below Hat Ridge. They're already working."

"Railroad blarney!" said the cattleman with bitter derision.

"It won't be pretty, but it'll be there. You've never seen a construction outfit highball."

Regal shook his fist toward the blazing north. "No crew in the world could hightail fast enough to beat that."

"Get your beef down there. I tell you they'll have a bridge! There'll be cars waitin' beyond, if they're needed!"

Regal swore at him steadily and in a low voice. Then he wheeled away and climbed into his saddle.

It was Speece, oddly, who strode over and put a hand on Regal's mount's bridle. "It *could* work that way, Charley," he said. "There's no other chance."

Regal sat rigid in the saddle, staring at his hands which were clenched on the horn. He didn't believe it could be done, and particularly he hated and distrusted the agency which might do it.

"No other chance," Speece repeated.

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THE black night was held out of Hell's Bend Canyon by two bonfires which, huge though they were, were puny against the spreading red glow to the north.

By their light, a spidery webbing of

YOU CAN'T beat a Panzer Division with a pea-shooter, nor knock down Zeros with sling-shots! Make sure that our service men will never have to fight without effective weapons—by going over your ten per cent quota, and—

GIVING U. S. WAR BONDS FOR CHRISTMAS!

timbers was crawling up between the narrow flanks of the canyon. It wasn't pretty, as the Deacon had predicted. But it was sound.

Men boosted themselves on it toward the crimson glowing sky. Other men hurried like ants along the canyon bottom. Freight wagons shuttled back and forth between the lip of the gully and the point, a mile away, below Hat Ridge, where lay the steel rails. Thirty-odd cattle cars were waiting there on a siding hastily flung down by Mallory's crews.

Charley Regal, riding point on the herd that meant life or disaster to him, came out of the timber to find planks going down on the cross timbers which had come rising yard after yard out of the black bottoms.

Lon Mallory was the first man across it. Deacon Bottle pulled up at Regal's elbow.

The cattleman's raw red face was wet as he looked at the miracle which had sprung up, unbelievably, in the night. He rubbed at his sandy mustache, and the tears and the grime made a muddy smudge on his cheeks.

"There it is," Mallory said gruffly. "Where's your herd?"

"Mallory," Regal began, "if there was a way to tell you—"

The railroad man swore. "Get started, mister! We'll have other stuff coming behind yours."

Regal nodded, the haze of bewilderment and despair gone from his eyes. He turned and roared an order at Speece.

The herd, nervous with the smell of smoke, spooked by the leaping flames at the bottom of Hell's Bend, refused the bridge. They jammed up behind the leaders, horns tossing, and sweating riders had to turn them and swing them back toward the timber.

Deacon Bottle directed the one gamble that time permitted. The cattle were lined out and started for the canyon at a dead run. They came with a blasting rush out of the night, hoofs thundering, held in a thin stream by cowboys whose throats went raw with yelling. Thin that stream remained, held so by flailing hats, the lash of ropes, the flash of pistols.

Men who rode that night had a tale to tell in the years that followed. Deacon Bottle was the right jaw of the vise holding the leaders true, Byron Speece the left. They were as close to being dead men as they ever would get, and both knew it.

Let their calculations go a fraction wrong, let a berserk steer lunge against them, and they were through.

Deacon Bottle rode with his gun in his hand, yelling. The twenty seconds it took to crush down across the last bit of open space were so many hours.

Too late the lip of the gorge revealed the winking fires below to the big leaders, for the planks of the bridge were booming under their hoofs. Shoulder to shoulder with them hammered Speece and the Deacon.

For one flashing instant Hell's Bend Canyon was a yawning pit of blackness on the Deacon's right. Then it was behind him, and the reverberating thunder told that the rest of the herd was coming.

The ball of iron in the pit of the Deacon's stomach slowly dissolved. He let his mount drop to a walk. He heard Mallory shouting and went to him.

Regal was already there, bent forward across the horn, his voice unsteady. "There'd be no Tilted L if it wasn't for your road, Mallory. There wasn't more'n a dozen head missed that bridge."

"Thank the Deacon," Mallory said. "You're not through yet. Fire jumped Hell's Bend three-four miles west. If it gets away there, you'll still lose. There's cars waiting a mile due south. The boys threw up a loading chute. Get your stuff down there and we'll haul it out for you."

He looked at the Deacon. "You'll give him a hand, Deacon? I'll be down as soon as I can get there."

The next two hours were bad ones. Still in darkness the herd, which had coasted to a straggling halt, had to be pulled together and drifted south. When they hit steel, they found the cars and the chute, as Mallory had promised. The loading began.

Deacon Bottle, who had neglected to bring along a supply of Old Pepper and missed it, swung up into the cab beside Tom Gallagher, who had brought in the bridge timbers together with the empties.

Gallagher grinned. "Mallory's been

callin' for cars from as far away as Black Boot Junction and Carver's Swamp. What in hell does he aim to do with 'em?"

"There's more stuff to come," the Deacon explained. "We've got to pull out every outfit north of Hell's Bend."

Gallagher whistled. A spare man with a bony jaw, he had been railroading since he was big enough to get into long pants. "Mallory never was a man to take a small chaw when you handed him a plug. But it'll take doing."

Deacon Bottle jumped down and went back to the chute. The loading was about finished. He found Regal, and the old man growled at him worriedly, "You seen Speece?"

The Deacon shook his head. A moment later he heard the hiss of steam and the grind of the big drive wheels. The door of the last car had not yet been shut.

Deacon Bottle shouted, ran for the engine. The cars were beginning to roll.

He caught the hand rail, started to pull himself up. Only then, by the glow from the firebox, did he get a glimpse of the interior of the cab.

Gallagher was seated at his levers. The fireman was hunched over a scoop of coal. Speece stood in the far corner of the cab, covering them both with a revolver.

He saw the Deacon, and very coolly swiveled the gun and shot. The bullet raked along the Deacon's wrist, making him lose his hold. He fell and tumbled backward, rolling, sharp bits of the gravel ballast tearing his face. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Tough Man

HALF stunned, the Deacon scrambled to get his hands and his knees under him. He had trouble doing that. Very clearly he heard the rumble of the wheels, the *clickety-click, clickety-click* the union crossings. He could see nothing.

As he worked, his hands failing to get purchase in the gravel, the picture took shape with asonishing clarity in his mind.

Speece was the big mogul! It was Speece who had whipped together all or part of Regal's crew to rustle their owner's beef. Raised on the scaffolding of Regal's distrust of the railroad, the game was sure-fire.

It was clear now why Speece had ordered Bailey not to shoot the Deacon when he brought the information about the bridge thrown across Hell's Bend. It was clear why he had insisted to Regal that the outfit's only chance lay in using it.

Once the cattle were across, once they had been loaded, Speece would have the opportunity to move. In his hands now was a herd worth perhaps twenty-five thousand dollars. The Deacon's train of thought leaped ahead, forecasting the play as he would have made it.

Speece could force Gallagher to take the cars as far as Thirty-Mile Point and there disable the locomotive. From there he could cut north into the hills, splitting up the herd if he had to.

It would be at least forty-eight hours before mounted men could reach that point, if Speece took the trouble to put a little track out of commission behind him. And he was clever enough to do exactly that.

By the time a posse could be gathered and led into the territory Speece had in mind—and Deacon Bottle didn't doubt that Speece knew the land well enough to lay his bets properly—recovery of the Tilted L herd would be next to hopeless.

Deacon Bottle struggled there in the sliding gravel. The air swept along by the train brushed against him. The dust got into his throat and choked him. He shook his head and it cleared a little. He could see the wheels pounding past in pairs.

He staggered to his feet. He could feel pain in the ankle Speece had injured.

The cars were a rushing blur in the darkness. The Deacon knew what would happen if he slipped, but he stepped toward that blur and began to go along with it at a limping run. He would have only one chance. If he missed, there wouldn't be time to get his footing for a second try.

He saw the iron rungs of the ladder abreast him, and reached for one. His pudgy fingers clamped down. The train's forward drive swung him off his feet, and

slammed him back against the bars of the cattle car.

Pendulum-like, he swung back, pulling himself up, feeling for the step with his foot. His boot socked home, the heel catching. He hung there, panting, unable to move. The rattling grind of the wheels made a funnel of sound that enveloped him.

Step by step he moved up. When his head came level with the slanting roof of the car, he clung to his hold with his left hand while feeling for his guns with his right.

The jar of the fall had knocked the right hand weapon from its holster. He lifted the left one out with his right hand and shoved it ahead of him over the lip of the roof.

He got a vague impression of confused movement at the rear of the train. It was unlikely that Regal would understand what was happening in time to do anything about it. Most or all of his crew was crooked. He was alone and helpless.

Regal must have made his guess, though, for a gun winked back there in the lightening darkness. There was a blur which could have been a man who had thrown himself hastily aboard a horse. . . . Regal, perhaps, making a futile effort to overhaul the train.

Two small crisp explosions sounded above the train's rattle. The blur stopped.

The Deacon heaved himself up another few inches. The night was fast disappearing. Two men were crouching on the roof of the last car. Their slugs had checked Regal.

The Deacon's left wrist, grazed by Speece's bullet, still was numb. He had a grip, but could feel nothing with his fingers. He couldn't tell whether his hold was loosening or not.

One of the two men swung his head around. It was Bailey. He leveled his revolver at Deacon Bottle and shot. The bullet tore splinters inches away from the Deacon's round face.

The Deacon took his time, hauling himself up so that he lay on his belly, jackknifed over the edge of the roof. The car was swaying unpredictably. He triggered once, and missed. He shot again, and saw Bailey clutch with both hands at his middle, fall on his side and roll off the roof.

The second man, Pete Andergord, still crouched on his knees. Little stabs of flame were jumping in front of him.

Deacon Bottle was lifting his gun again when, abruptly, he ceased being able to see anything. It was as if a black cloth had been laid across his eyes. He felt a stinging pain, but that was all.

He didn't move. He knew that he had only one chance. Very carefully he let go the bullet he had been aiming, and then deliberately, blind though he was, placed two more as close to that one as he could.

Only then did he reach with the back of his hand to wipe at the blood running into his eyes from the bullet-slash on his forehead.

In the moment of clear vision which followed he saw Andergord was standing up. He had been hit, not seriously, but hard enough to turn his stomach against further fighting.

Deacon Bottle saw him start his jump to the comparative safety of the ditch beside the tracks, then blood got into his eyes again. When he had it cleared away, Andergord was no longer in sight.

The Deacon hung on for a moment, figuring. He was pretty sure that he was, now, no match for Speece. He still could drop off the train. He would get a jolting, perhaps a broken bone, but he wouldn't have to go up, crippled, against a gun-master.

Lying belly down, the Deacon reloaded his gun. Maybe Speece had been right. He was getting old. When a man began wondering which fights he should accept and which he should skip, he was through.

The Deacon knew how much this particular affair meant to the railroad and to the Latigo range. But right now he wasn't impressed by thinking about it. He knew that the most important thing was whether or not he, Deacon Bottle, was finished as a fighting man.

He decided that if the game had to end, he would end it playing his cards against whatever odds shaped up, as he always had.

He began to crawl forward toward the locomotive, wiping the blood out of his eyes at intervals.

IT WAS nearly half light now. Smoke and cinders from the stack flattened down along the train top. When he came to a gap between cars, he gathered his feet up under him and lunged out, grasping with his hands and knees for the boards of the swaying catwalk.

It was probable, he judged, that Speece had heard the shooting, but Speece might interpret that as the staving off of pursuit by Bailey and Andergord. Speece would be pretty well occupied in the locomotive cab.

Gallagher was a tough customer who required attention, and the fireman would be watchful for orders.

The Deacon crawled on, making slower and slower progress. His head was throbbing, and the flow of blood from his split scalp would not stop.

Running beside the train on his injured ankle had done more harm than he had supposed. Pain stabbed through it whenever pressure was applied. He knew he couldn't trust it to hold him. His bullet-grazed wrist still was numb and nearly useless.

He knew he was a fool. He was advancing into something too tough for him to handle. He wasn't Deacon Bottle any more. He was a crippled shell of the man whose fighting reputation was only a legend.

It was some time before the Deacon realized that the train was picking up speed. The lurching of the duckboards under his groping fingers was more abrupt.

The rattle of the train had risen to a clattering cataract of sound. Trees and ledges, past which the train raced, hurled back the racket redoubled.

Flung about in violent jerks, Deacon Bottle cursed Gallagher. Was the man mad? His cars were bouncing on the rails like corn in a hopper. Smoke and sparks tore back from the stack in a flat stream.

The broken swaying of the car roof turned the Deacon half sick. Further progress was impossible. A terrific jerk all but wrenched loose his hold on the duckboards. The breath was slammed back in his throat.

The Deacon lay flat on his belly, swearing in weak and bitter helplessness. The tender with its load of coal was in front of him, only one car away. He under-

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stood, though, that he wasn't going to reach it. He was done.

A stronger man might have made it, but not the Deacon now. It was only a question of time before one of these savage lurches flipped him off into space. It was only a question of time, too, before the train itself piled up in splintered ruin.

Blood ran down into his eyes again. It was not worth it, he thought, to clear them. He waited for a moment, blind, thinking it would be better to let the thing end that way. He was weak and he was hurt and he was through.

He grew angry at that thought, though. He had never quit before; he had never slunk away from the picture of death when it loomed in front of him. He reached with his left wrist and wiped the blood out of his eyes.

He saw Byron Speece on the load of coal in the tender, coming toward him.

There was something queer about Speece's face. It was contorted in mortal terror.

It seemed to the Deacon that he had unrestricted time to debate that. He was dealing in fractions of seconds, but he didn't know it.

Gallagher, of course, had turned the trick. Sitting calmly under Speece's gun, he had built up the train's speed until it was too late for the Tilted L. ramrod to do anything. Gallagher's levers were a mystery to the cowboy; even the throttle was beyond him.

Gallagher was a hard one. Probably there had been a grin on his gaunt, bony face. "You name it, son," he had said to Speece. "Couple minutes more of this and you and I'll be in the ditch with the rest of this shebang on top of us. Or you can throw that popgun of yours out the window and be a good dog. Call it quick."

Maybe Speece had argued it; maybe he didn't. But towering fear pounded up in him. A shred of his gunman's self was left, and he didn't throw away his weapon. Instead he fled that cab of terror, fought his way out of it, turned his back on the ghastly destruction which might lie at the next curve in the tracks.

There in the tender, coming across the coal, the unholy fright faded in Speece's eyes.

The Deacon knew why. Speece was seeing something he understood. Guns and gun-fighting were in his blood and bones. Sight of the Deacon pulled him back from that pit of unfamiliar horror.

Lurching, jerking, Speece pulled his gun up.

It all happened before the blood had time to blur the Deacon's eyes once more. It is possible that Speece thought he had a crippled man to deal with, and there was no hurry; possible, too, that remnants of his fear blunted his swiftness.

What is more likely is that Deacon Bottle, playing out the last gamble of a man who figured he was finished, summoned every shred of skill and courage that remained in him. The Deacon never had fired a faster shot, never a truer one.

And Speece, with the Deacon's bullet in his brain, never got his shot away.

Deacon Bottle brushed at his eyes because the curtain had dropped across them again. This time the curtain wouldn't go away. His efforts grew more feeble, and then his face dropped forward against the rough duckboards.

His last thought was a casual curiosity as to how long it would be before even a small jolt rolled him off the top of the car. . . .

★

THEY had Deacon Bottle stretched out on the telegrapher's cot at Smoky Bend when Lon Mallory and Enoch Starling got there around noon.

The railroad medico that Mallory had ordered up from North Central met them in front of the shanty.

"You fellows bring any rope? Nothing but tying will hold him down much longer. For a man who's lost all but a pint or so of blood he's mean."

"We brought along the kind of blood he needs," Mallory said.

Deacon Bottle, who hadn't heard that conversation, glared at them when they entered.

"How's your fire?"

"Not out," Starling rumbled, "but it's run into trouble. The wind backed up on it a little, and we kept hittin' it. By dark it'll be mighty skinny."

"Get all the stuff across the canyon?"

"Blame near all."

"Enough," added Mallory thoughtfully, "so that particular section of range figures the railroad might be worth keeping, most particularly if you're handy to help run it."

"Hell," said the Deacon, "Gallagher is the boy that did the hard part. The credit belongs to him."

"Yeah. I've talked to him. He told me how he watched you crawling over those cars. Too far gone to stand up, but aiming to get to Speece if it was the last thing you ever did. He damn' near died, he said, trying to scare Speece into quitting before you could get close enough to have your head blown off. The only thing that went wrong was that Speece didn't do what Gallagher figured he was going to."

"I'd as leave be dragged through brush by a team of wild mules as ride with that Gallagher again," said the Deacon sourly. "He ain't got good sense. Him saying I might've got my head blown off!"

Mallory chuckled. "Don't get proddy. Deacon. You're not up to it. Piece of information you'll like to have is that Dave Barlow was running with Speece all right."

"How'd you find that out?" the Deacon wanted to know.

"A couple miles this side of Hat Ridge some of the boys picked up this Tilted L fellow, Pete Andergord. He had a slug between his ribs. Seems you'd shot him off the train, along with Bailey. We persuaded him a little, and he got to talking. Told us how Speece had built up his rustling deal and was picking the Tilted L clean. Dave had been stringing along with the game, but he was young and he scared easy."

"Regal know that?" the Deacon asked sharply.

"He does now. He did the best thing he could think of right away quick. He sent along this." Mallory heaved the gunny sack he was carrying up onto the cot. He didn't do it enthusiastically.

The Deacon felt around in the sack and pulled up three bottles. His faded eyes lighted and he licked his lips.

"Old Pepper, every doggone one of 'em!" he exclaimed admiringly. "That old coot Regal knows what's good for a man. You fellers bring along anything else for yourselves?"

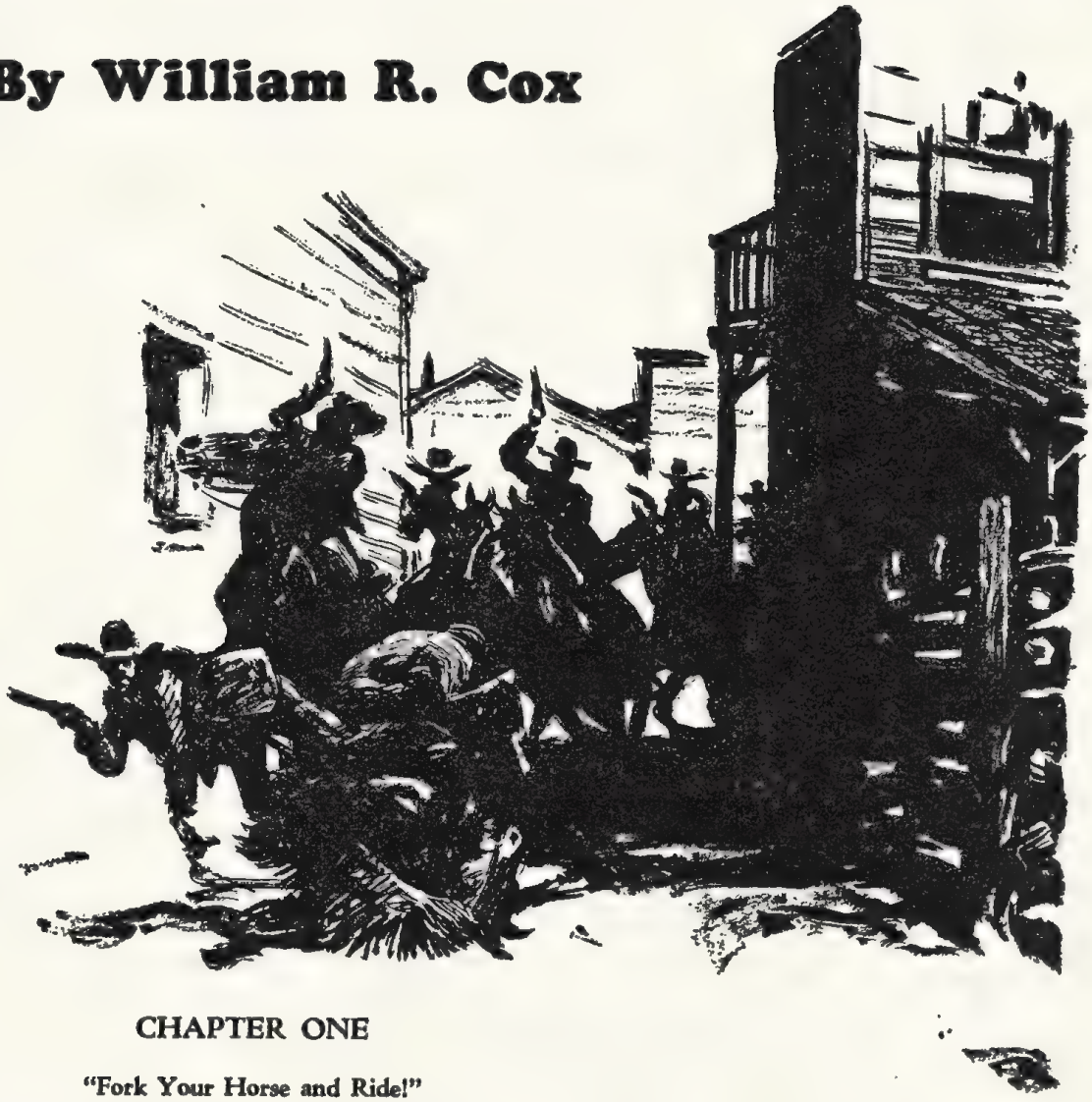
"Didn't have time," said Mallory in a hollow voice.

"Well, then, looks like we'll all have to do our celebrating on Old Pepper. Enoch, see what you can do about getting this cork out, will you?"

Sheriff Enoch Starling wiped the sweat of unhappy anticipation from his forehead, then manfully tackled the job.

THE END

By William R. Cox



CHAPTER ONE

"Fork Your Horse and Ride!"

THE HOUSE on Vegas Street was newly-painted and there were flowers in the front yard, and a sign that said, "Mrs. Hinton's Boarding House." The verandah was in good repair, with solid chairs and a swing. Bending over the patch of garden was a feminine figure wearing a calico dress and a sunbonnet.

Larry Loper hitched at the sagging gunbelt around his slim middle and said, "Mrs. Hinton?"

The sunbonnet swung around and Larry looked into the bluest eyes he had ever seen. White teeth flashed at him and red lips parted in a friendly smile. A fresh young voice said, "I'm Molly Hinton. Mother's inside."

Larry fumbled with his wide hat. He said, "Howdy, miss. Would your father be Mosby Hinton?"

The blue eyes wavered. "What's he done? Is he all right? Are you an officer?"

"*Oh*-oh!" said Larry. He grinned, looking very young and merry. "Sounds like he's the Mosby Hinton I'm looking for. My mom always said the Hintons and the Lopers were trouble hungry from birth and never lived to get their fill."

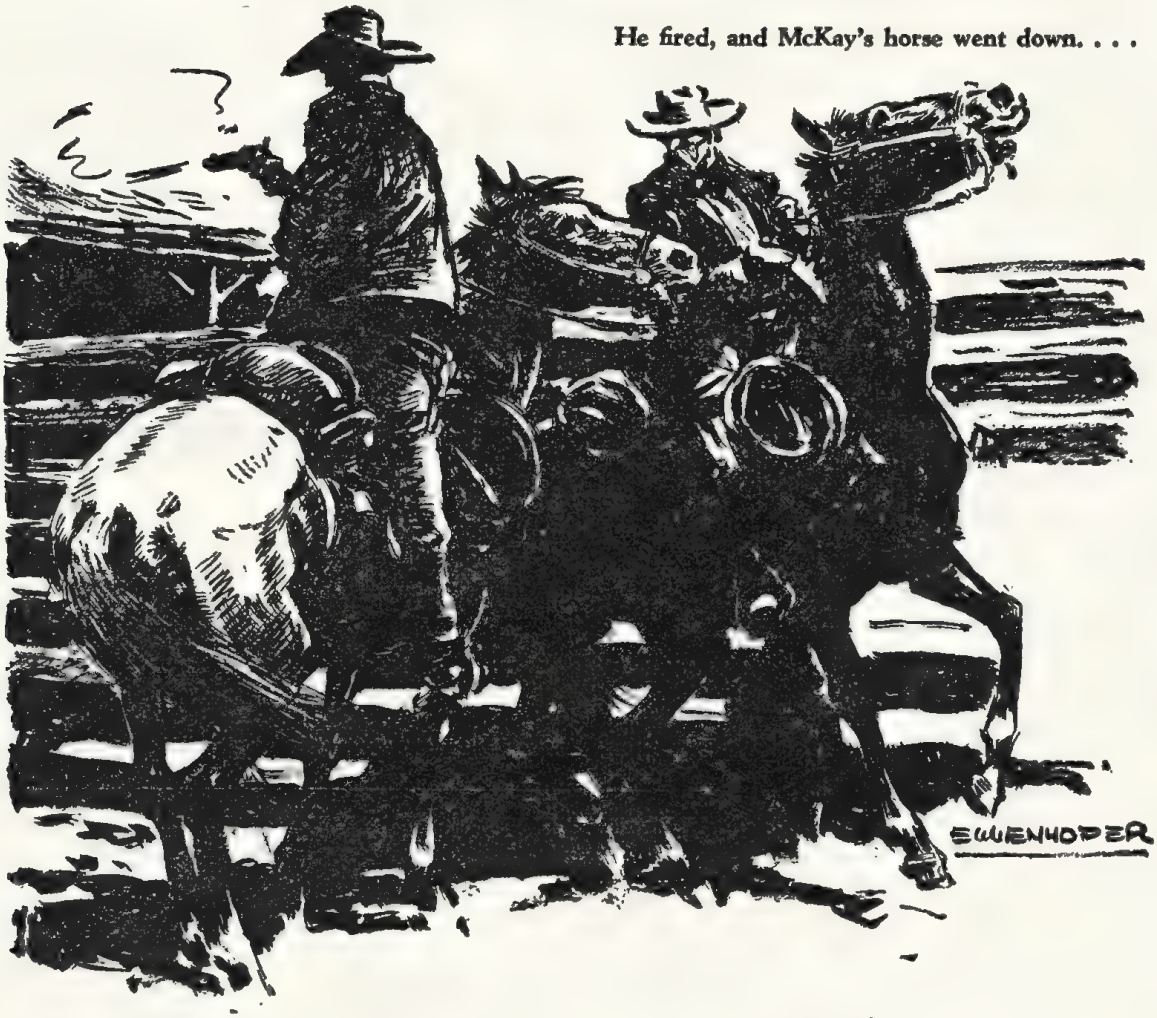
"Loper?" repeated the girl. "You—you're a Loper, from East Texas?"

"Yess'm," said Larry. When the girl arose, she stood taller than most women, but still not too tall. She stared straight into Larry's eyes. Then turned and ran up the steps into the house.

There was the pound of footsteps on the boards behind him and Larry turned, perplexed. He saw a middle-aged, red-faced man running awkwardly toward the Hinton house. Two husky young fellows

WHEN TERROR RULED AT RANDOM

A Gripping Novel of a Renegade Town



He fired, and McKay's horse went down. . . .

★

In that crooked town, the lawman winked at killings, the banker had his private, stolen stake set aside, and the saloonman's deadfall was a murder-snare.... But none of them could stifle the ghostly plea of the hanged Jim Loper for a long over-due gun-champion.

★

sprinted in pursuit, and Larry realized at once that they were about to catch up with their prey. One of them whipped out a sixgun and said, "Stop, damn you, Hinton! You've cold-decked your last deal in Random."

Larry seemed to float out of the pleasant yard onto the walk. He reached Mosby Hinton just as the two younger men closed in. He got a shocked glimpse of Hinton's bloodshot eyes, his grizzled, unkempt hair; the sagging features of a man who was not quite a man. And then the partner of Larry's dead Uncle Dan rushed past and was running for the sanctuary of the house.

The man with the gun threw down, and

Larry's arm came up, cutting at the man's wrist with the edge of his hand. The gun exploded, then fell to earth. The second, smaller fellow aimed a prompt kick at Larry.

Backing a step, Larry seizing the high heel of the kicker's boot. He lifted the leg, sent the man flying into the middle of the street. He circled and was in time to meet an avalanche of fists and feet as the first man swung into violent action.

Two blows got home to Larry before he could put himself on guard. The man was red-haired, ugly and tough. Larry stepped back once, then forward, throwing an uppercut at the wide-open chin. The man's jaw canted sideways, he spun off the ground and sailed over Mrs. Hinton's fence.

In the dust of the street the other fellow said aloud, "That I lived to see it! Mister, could you try it again? I could sell tickets at fifty dollars a throw for that one!"

Larry laughed. "Your friend's out cold, mister. You'd better lug him home."

The short, thick-set man got up and brushed at his clothing. He wore denim range pants and a red woolen shirt and seemed thoroughly good-natured. He said, "He ain't my friend and he ain't got much of a home. That's Mike McKay. I'm Little Joe."

"Don't mean a thing to me," said Larry. "My name's Loper."

"You're a tough man. Loper . . . The stocky man stopped, gulped, and stared. He said, "Loper? Kin of Dan Loper?"

"He was my uncle," said Larry. "Did you know him?"

The short man said slowly, "No. I only heard of him. I'm Little Joe. I'll—mebbe I'll see you again, Loper."

He turned and trudged towards the saloon called the Occidental. Larry went on inside the Hinton yard. He picked up the still slumbering form of his erstwhile opponent and heaved him unceremoniously into the street. Then he mounted the steps of the wide verandah and walked through the open door of Mrs. Hinton's Boarding House.

THERE was no sign of Mosby Hinton. A middle-aged, tall woman came from the kitchen and stared at Larry. She had luxuriant blonde hair, her figure was full and about her was a gracious frankness, mixed now with some wonder and much disturbance at the sight of her visitor.

She said, "What are you to Dan Loper, son?"

"Miz Hinton," said Larry, "he was my father's big brother. Us Lopers always wondered how he came to be killed up here in the Territory, so I moseyed in for a look. We had your letter, ten years ago, saying he was dead. . . . "

"Ten years ago," she nodded, "this very day."

Larry said, "Pa set a store by Dan Loper. If anyone downed him, we'd want to know."

Cissy Hinton said, "Come in to the parlor, son. I've got to talk to you. This was a bad time for you to come to Random City—"

Larry said, "No time's different from another to a natural-born trouble-hound, ma'am" The parlor was stiff with horse hair furniture, but it was Sunday-neat and dustless.

He sat straight on a chair and said, "Been mining a little, gambling a little, even ran a few head of cattle. Just a rollin' stone, truth to tell. But I had to get to Random."

"You are like Dan," she mused. "A fine, easy-going man with nothing but good in him. . . . They hung him, Larry. We—we couldn't stop them."

Larry felt himself freeze upon the chair. His hat dropped to the floor, his ruddy face turned paper white. He said, "Who hung him?"

"There was a gambler called Sidewinder Clay," she said, her voice very low and gentle. "My husband, Mosby, was a strapping young fellow only ten years ago. He and Dan had been partners for ten years before that. They had a mine up yonder—the Cissy Belle, named for me."

"Wasn't any good," said Larry impatiently. "I heard. Who hung my uncle and why?"

"Mosby and Dan were in a poker game with Clay and Old Mike McKay, father of the boy you just beat, and Jay Fountain." Clay accused Mosby of cheating. The game broke up and Dan, Sidewinder and

Mosby went outside. It was night and two shots were fired. Sidewinder was known never to carry a gun—so it was murder, you see."

Larry said, "My Uncle Dan never murdered anyone."

"It was his gun that had been fired," said Cissy Hinton gently. "He admitted it. Mosby tried to get him away. . . . Mosby was a good man in those days. I never understood it, Larry. Your uncle was our best friend, always. Before I married Mosby, the three of us were together all the time. Dan worshipped Molly when she was a little girl. . . . He was always so kind and good to her."

"He never had a trial, or we'd have known. Why didn't you tell us?" Larry demanded.

"I couldn't, said Cissy Hinton simply. "I didn't want his folks to know how Dan Loper ended."

"Who was responsible for it?" Larry repeated. "Who headed the mob?"

"It was mostly Old Mike McKay and Jay Fountain, I reckon," she said uneasily. "But that was ten years ago. . . ."

"You don't understand, Mrs. Hinton," said Larry. "Back home there's lots of us Lopers. I'm just the baby. Every one of us would be on a horse the minute he got the news Uncle Dan was hung without a trial. It wasn't right to hold back. You should have told us."

"You're very young, Larry," said Cissy. Her voice trembled, "and a lot like Dan. We—we felt bad enough. We didn't want bloodshed. There had been enough of that. Dan shot Sidewinder all right—he'd been drinking and Sidewinder had goaded him some, I reckon. Don't you see—we live here, Larry. We wanted to live right."

His anger simmered down to a low boil, and he said, "Excuse me, ma'am. Your husband was my uncle's partner. It wouldn't be right to quarrel with you. I'll talk to Mosby. . . ."

Cissy leaned forward. "No! Don't do it. You've already made an enemy of young Mike McKay. His father and Felix Brand and Jay Fountain about run this town. Eat a meal with us and then get on your horse and ride out of here, Larry Loper!"

Larry said slowly, "Run away from the men who lynched my uncle?"

"Felix Brand is a cold killer who hides behind a badge. He's downed twenty men," she said. "Young Mike and his friends back Felix. What chance have you got?"

Larry said, "Excuse me again, ma'am, but I've got to talk to your husband."

He got up, hat in hand, and walked out through the dining room, with its long table set for the boarders, and into the kitchen. The tall girl was stirring something on the stove. She turned and looked at Larry.

"Father lit out for the hills. He's riding a bay gelding. You could find him—"

In the doorway behind Larry, Cissy Hinton protested, *"Molly!"*

"I'm sorry, mother," the girl said. She put the large spoon upon the sink and wiped her hands on the gingham apron. Her face was flushed from the heat of the stove and she was more attractive than ever as she faced her mother defiantly. "Father's been no good for years, since Dan Loper was lynched. He's drunk and worthless, and goodness knows how we've existed. If it wasn't for the money he got from the sale of the Cissy Belle, we'd have starved.

Cissy said tiredly, "I reckon the money helped you Lopers, too, if you got a lump sum. Mosby just doles it out to us as we need it."

Larry opened his mouth, shut it again. Then he said, "Yeah. Like you say. Money's all right. But I want to see Mosby."

"The hills are tricky," said Molly. "But a good man on a horse could find him."

Larry said, "I'm looking for him, starting now. But first I'm seeing Random City."

He bowed courteously, unconsciously flourishing the new Stetson he had bought in Tucson. He walked out into the afternoon sun and Cissy said involuntarily, "Dan had the same little ways. . . . Attractive—and sudden!"

"This one's a fighter, too," said Molly quietly. "Maybe he'll straighten father out."

Cissy shook her head. "Nothing will straighten out your father. When he couldn't save Dan Loper from that rope, something died in him. It'll never come to life"

She went into the other room and sat heavily on a chair, remembering the Dan Loper who had always been staunch, always around to bolster the laughing, generous Mosby Hinton, who had married her out of hand the week she had arrived to sing in Mike McKay's Occidental, in the days when Random was a booming mining camp. . . .

★

DOWN Random's Vegas Street, swaggering instinctively knowing he was a target for hostile eyes, walked Larry Loper. He was blocked by a lean man with sloping shoulders and faded gray eyes and drooping mustache. He took time to see that the man wore a star and two guns slung low.

The man said, "I'm Marshal Brand," as though that were enough to end any argument.

"I'm Larry Loper, and I'll buy a drink," grinned the young man.

The gray eyes never changed, the lips beneath the mustache were thin and tight. But Felix Brand said, "I'd admire to."

In the Occidental all conversation ceased as they barged through the batwing doors. Little Joe, at the pool table, chalked his cue and blinked rapidly. Two slouching youths reached tentatively for their hips, then let their hands drop as they recognized Felix Brand. The thick-bodied man behind the bar growled, "You're supposed to chuck him in jail, Felix, not pamper him."

The thick-set man had red hair and was easily identifiable as the father of young Mike McKay. He had thick, whitish, eyebrows and pendulant lips and was as ugly as his offspring.

"His name is Loper," said Felix Brand succinctly.

Larry braced around, hooking his elbows on the bar, keeping the elder McKay well within his line of vision. He found himself also eyeing Little Joe. That stocky gentleman had evidently not reported him to headquarters. He remembered that Little Joe had said that Mike McKay Jr. was no friend of his. He tucked this fact under his Stetson and liked it.

A very fat man heaved himself up from a poker table. He had rosy cheeks and pink eyes and a halo of white hair. He said, "Another Loper, eh? One of *our* Lopers?" His voice purred and Larry realized that he looked like a sleek old tomcat. "My name's Jay Fountain, Loper."

Larry took it all in. He was in the middle of a pack of wolves. Four men slipped out of doors hastily, as though the devil was after them. Felix Brand's dull eyes still did not show a flicker of life or interest. Little Joe stopped chalking the cue and stepped lightly around the end of the pool table.

Larry said gently, "I'll buy for the house."

"Not in here!" exploded McKay. "You beat my son. You took advantage of him."

"He was about to shoot a man," said Larry without rancor. "The marshal here would've had to arrest him."

"Mosby stacked a deck! He's done it before, but this time we got it on him," McKay said to Brand. "Everyone saw it. He was drunk and clumsy. He's been cold-deckin' the games here for ten years."

Felix said, "He should of been shot on the spot." It was a flat dry statement and it contained contempt. Larry's appraising gaze returned to the marshal. Brand was one of the names mentioned by Cissy Hinton as controlling the town along with McKay and Fountain. But the marshal was no man's house hound, that was obvious.

"He tipped the table on us," whined McKay. For a husky, evil-looking man he was surprisingly suppliant. "He did a quick run outa the door and Young Mike took after him. Little Joe went too. Little Joe lost a month's pay, didn't you, Joe?"

"Yep," said Little Joe, promptly, but he was looking at Larry.

"Tell Felix what happened," urged McKay. Jay Fountain had folded his small, woman's hands on his fat belly and was leaning against the bar, his weight causing the wood to creak. Larry was relaxed, but completely aware of his danger. The young toughs had imperceptibly spread for action so that Brand and Larry were in the middle of a semi-circle before the bar.

Little Joe said in the same level voice, "This Loper stopped Mike, knocked his gun away and beat hell outa him."

"With his fists?" asked Felix Brand coldly.

"First time it's been done," said Little Joe, openly grinning now. "You'd give a farm t' see it!"

"I want him jailed," McKay protested, but all the bellow and insistance was out of him. Larry slid his hand away from his gun, realizing that the danger was past. Little Joe racked his cue and drifted to Larry's side.

Felix said, "You better serve that drink, Mike. Your boy's beat up on everyone in town. He got the tables turned on him, for once and now you're squawking. Mosby don't carry a gun any more. Young Mike coulda been facin' a murder charge right now."

Larry dropped a gold piece on the bar. He said under his breath, "You're a square dealer, Marshal."

The mustache twitched on the hard face. Felix Brand said, "I aim to be. But you'd better hit the breeze, Loper. Your breed ain't wanted here. Have your drink and go."

Larry said, "I'm aimin' to go. . . . And come back."

"Don't do it," advised Brand. "I'll be the first to pull on you if you start anything."

But Larry was looking at Jay Fountain. The green eyes of the fat man were almost asleep and his teeth grinned a little between parted fat lips. The little hands did not move, but Larry sensed the quiet power and the evil that was threatening him.

He shook it off, turning to speak to Little Joe, who was regarding him as a terrier surveys a strange bulldog. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Branded for Boothill

A LITTLE after midnight, in his uncomfortable hotel bed, Larry heaved over, reaching for his gun. A voice outside his window said sharply, "It's me, Little Joe. Get dressed!"

Larry did not ask questions. He had learned enough during the hours he had spent getting apparently drunk as a lord in Random City bars. He had learned that the town was indeed in the hands of Jay Fountain, Mike McKay and Felix Brand.

Fountain owned the bank and the T Bar ranch, a large, prosperous layout. Mike McKay had the liquor, Felix Brand controlled the gambling. Quiet enough during the week, Random paid off on Saturdays when the miners from the hills and the cowboys from the ranches came in. These three men collected all the loose change. And Fountain, the shrewdest of them, banked it.

Young Mike McKay and his toughs did as they pleased. Brand ignored anything less than capital crime or grand larceny. Random City was not a healthy place to turn loose your gold, Larry recognized.

He got his pants and boots on and was buttoning his shirt. Little Joe said, "Down the roof and through the back to the corral. I'll have your hoss saddled."

There was a scratching on the roof. Larry debated but one moment. He had run into Little Joe in every place he had hit that night. They had been careful not to speak, but he had a feeling Little Joe was watching him. No one had been friendly in Random, but neither had anyone offered trouble that night. Offering himself as a target on the roof was not a thing Larry looked forward to. He compromised by holding his revolver in his left hand and sliding flat, making as little noise as possible.

It was a short drop to the ground. He jarred down and immediately ran toward the back lot. There was the corral, and two saddled horses. Then a hand caught his, and Molly Hinton's voice said, "I sent Little Joe after you. Mike McKay Jr. is back and is collecting his mob. Felix Brand has ridden out somewhere."

"Was Mike out of town?" grinned Larry. "I thought he was in the hospital."

"He's tougher than you think," she said. "He—he bothers me, some. . . . He was out looking for father with Whitey and Panky and the others . . . ."

Larry said, "Did they catch Mosby?"

"No," said Molly troubled. "At least they say not. They came out to the house and looked. Then they said they'd get you."

"Who's Little Joe?" whispered Larry. His lips, close to her ear, were tickled by

fragrant locks of escaping hair. It was mighty pleasant. . . .

"A prospector," she said. "A stranger, but all right, I think. He only wanted his money back from father this afternoon, he said."

Larry nodded. "We'll find your father. Then I'll be back. Thanks a heap, Molly. . . ."

"Here they come!" she said. "Oh, do hurry!"

The pounding of horses' hoofs was almost upon them when Larry swung aboard the roan. He saw Little Joe, like a jockey upon a big black, and then the mob was bursting around the edge of the hotel.

Larry said, "Make for those hills!" and Little Joe bounced away. Larry caught sight of a large blanket roll on the black. Little Joe was ready for a long stay.

Mike McKay, his face somewhat awry, was bellowing, "There he goes!"

"Nope—over here," Larry called clearly. The gun was in his hand. He fired one shot and McKay's horse went down. In the narrow alley by the hotel, the others piled up as Mike described a second neat circle for that day and landed on his back. A big man fired a shot which whizzed by Larry's ear.

Larry emptied his guns at them. The big man went down howling, holding his right arm with his left hand. The others in the mob hesitated, cursed, and got tangled up in fallen horses and men.

Larry said, "I'll be back. Don't wait up for me, but you can expect me!"

He spoke to the roan and the animal leaped away into the night. He hit the road west and remembered the turn he had passed riding in. The trail let upward to the black, rocky hills and the roan took it in bounding strides.

The horse and rider were not far ahead. Little Joe had been waiting. He said in his emotionless accents, "Did you get Mike?"

"I'm saving him," Larry explained. "I don't cotton to off-hand killings."

Little Joe said, "How do you expect to last against that mob?"

"Haven't figured that out," grinned Larry. "Say, have you got any idea where Mosby Hinton might be?"

"That damned crook!" said Little Joe calmly. "He's probably up around that old mine, the Cissy Belle. He sashays up there every so often."

"Then why didn't Mike McKay hole him up?" asked Larry curiously.

"Nobody knows he goes there," said Little Joe, " 'ceptin' me. The mine's been closed for years."

Larry said, "You been trailin' Mosby?"

"Just prospectin'," said Little Joe. "These hills once had gold in 'em. Might be some left."

They rode in silence, climbing, then sliding down a slope, and climbing again, each time attaining a higher level above sea. Little Joe seemed to know the way, so Larry let the roan follow the black.

After a while Larry said, "You're new to this country?"

"Yes and no," said the short man. "Been up here awhile before I went to Random."

"You know anything about the Dan Loper lynching, ten years ago?" asked Larry hopefully.

"Nope," said Little Joe. "Only things I heard. But I never believe anything I hear and only half of what I see."

Larry said, "I aim to learn about that hanging. No Loper ever had it done to him except Uncle Dan—and he was supposed to be a good man."

"Mobs don't recognize goodness," said Little Joe. "I seen a couple mobs in my time, back in California. Mike McKay and Jay Fountain was partners of this Sidewinder, they say. You wouldn't expect 'em to recognize a good man, would you?"

"Nope," said Larry. "But maybe they can be convinced that it pays to look at a man twice."

They rode along in silence through an arroyo which wound ever upward until they came to a conical hill, higher than the others. They twisted and turned on a narrow trail and the roan picked his way slowly and with caution. Larry saw a wide place, and then there was a hole in the mountainside.

"The old tunnel of the Cissy Belle, before they got production and broke through on the other side," Little Joe said.

He rummaged in his pack and produced a small coal-oil lamp which he proceeded to light. They tied the horses and entered the sinister looking hole in the rock.

It was a steep down grade and they had to dig with their boot-heels to keep from losing balance. Joe loosened a rock and swore violently. The lamp bounced from his hand and went out, and Larry instinctively ducked, getting hands and knees on solid rock, holding very still in the pitch blackness.

The sound of a rifle shot was very loud there in the bowels of the earth. Larry's gun came to his fist and he plunged forward, whispering, "You all right, Joe?"

To his surprise, Little Joe bawled, "Mosby Hinton! Hold your fire!"

★

THE echoes of the little man's voice seemed to reverberate among the caverns endlessly. Then a hoarse answer came. "You keep outa here, Little Joe. I ain't got your money."

"Never mind the money," Joe called, "Larry Loper wants to talk to you. I'm peaceable, Mosby."

There was silence. Then Hinton said, "Walk down ten paces straight ahead. Keep your hands locked behind your neck. I got you covered, remember, every step."

Joe obeyed without question. Larry's hand struck the lamp and he picked it up, carrying it between hands locked in the back of his head. He felt very foolish, stumbling in the dark.

Ahead of him Little Joe brought up against a wall, and Larry stopped. The voice came from behind, now. "What you want, Larry Loper? I can't take chances. I'm about ready to make a move and I don't want interference."

"You're gonna drift out of the country?" asked Larry, facing about. "You're gonna leave your wife and daughter?"

"They're better off without me," said Mosby bitterly. I'm no good to them."

Joe spoke quickly. "The gold you been hand-pickin' out of here has kept them pretty good all these years."

There was the ominous click of a rifle bolt. Mosby's voice was hard. "You know too much, Little Joe."

Larry said, "I'm Dan Loper's nephew and Little Joe is on our side. Don't that mean anything to you?"

"Yes," said Mosby. "It means I'm clearing out before the ruckus starts. Nobody can beat Fountain, McKay and Brand in this part of the woods. I been ten years figurin' a way, and it can't be done."

Larry waited a moment, his mind racing furiously. Then he said, "Nobody can, huh? What's that over there?"

In the dark, the slight motion of his hand throwing the coal lamp was indistinguishable, he hoped. He ducked with the same motion, swung about. His hand streaked to his holstered six-shooter. He threw it underhand, but hard, straight at the shadowy figure crouching there.

His lithe body uncoiled and shot after the gun. His hands fastened upon Hinton's rifle, using the leverage of his tremendously powerful shoulders. In a moment Mosby Hinton was gasping and unarmed against the damp mine shaft wall and Little Joe was igniting the flickering oil lamp.

Hinton's face was gaunt with fatigue and chagrin. He sank onto a round boulder and said, "I never made a right move since Dan Loper was hung. But I wouldn't believe a man could horn-swoggle me outa the drop."

Larry talked fast. "I wanted to convince you. I wanted to show you that Random City *can* be beat! They've had the drop on you since they hung my Uncle Dan. But you can wiggle out of it, if you'll throw in with us."

"Anybody that sides me in Random now will get lead in his guts," said Mosby dully. "You must be even crazier than Dan."

Larry said, "I might be crazier. But I'm madder, too. They got no call to be hanging Loper men without a trial. I want to know about it."

There was a little silence. Then Mosby Hinton said, "We were right full of McKay's likker. Sidewinder was in with Jay Fountain and McKay. Felix was out lookin' for a killer Mexican. They mobbed us and hung Dan because his was the only gun that had been shot when Sidewinder was killed. I got saved because my gun was clean—and because Cissy busted in and bluffed them off."

He hesitated, then said, "Mebbe you can understand what happens to a man when his partner gets hung and his wife gets him off. They would've hung me be-

cause they didn't like neither Dan nor me. We were tough."

Larry said, "What about this mine? I thought you sold it? Where's Dan's share?"

"I faked the sale to a company I invented," said Mosby.

"But why?" demanded Larry.

Little Joe said quietly, "Because he knew there was still gold in the Cissy Belle. He didn't dare run it openly, or they'd get him like they got Dan Loper. Prob'ly Mosby would have hightailed it long ago if there hadn't been gold in here somewhere. . . ."

Mosby said bitterly, "That's it. They'd of framed me somehow. I took out enough to keep Cissy and Molly. I packed it over to Carbine and a banker I know cashed it. But I been cacheing some, every time. I didn't have much time to spend it up here, because they would have discovered me. But I picked enough, there's a bag of it.

"I'm headin' for Carbine to cash it and send half the money to Cissy. The other half to you, Loper. Then I'm heading south to the Border."

He put his face down in his hands and was still, not sobbing, just finished with life, waiting the decision of the men who had him in their hands.

★

BACK in Random City, there was a light in the bank's office long after the town had closed. Banker Jay Fountain's still, small hands lay flat on the desk. He seemed to observe them with faint surprise, as though not quite sure they belonged on his gross person. The fingernails were always immaculately clean, with pink half moons delicately traced. He said, "We've been making a mistake."

"If you mean by lettin' that damned Mosby Hinton rig the poker games all these years, you're plumb right," complained old Mike McKay. "I allus knew he was doin' it, but couldn't catch him until today."

Felix Brand said, "Talk plain, Jay."

Fountain's green eyes lifted momentarily and there appeared therein his consummate respect for the pale-eyed killer who wore the marshal's star. He said, "I've been checking on the Hinton family's finances. For a year after Hinton sold the Cissy Belle to that Eastern outfit, they were poor as church mice. Miz Hinton opened the boarding house. Mosby just got drunk.

"Then things changed. They got pretty prosperous. Always had money, kept only a few boarders. Mosby says it was from the sale of the mine and the poker games. I figured it all out."

"How?" demanded McKay.

"I know what things cost," said Fountain simply. "That's part of my business. I checked up rough-like on what Hinton spends keepin' up that big house. I know that their boarders pay some, it ain't near enough."

"But the mine sale . . . ?"

"Wasn't any," said Fountain. For a moment there was admiration in his voice. "I checked on that sale yesterday. Mosby never sold that mine."

"The Continental Gold Co. bought it!" said McKay. "He got drunk and showed me the papers!"

"There is no such company," Fountain said calmly. "Mosby's got a friend in Carbine who helped him fake it—an old banker fella named Jones. I had it looked into."

The three of them sat very still. McKay's mouth opened and shut again. Then Felix Brand said, "It wasn't a crime for Mosby to do that."

"His crime was cheating at poker," said Fountain. "And I'll swear out a warrant. I was in the game."

Felix said, "Like always, I'm warning you. I'll not stand for a rigged killing. I'll not put in with any sort of frame. He's not a man I can gun in the open and I won't have anyone doing it in the dark."

Jay Fountain said, "You take your share of things always, Felix, but sometimes you make it difficult."

"I see no profit in it," said Felix coldly.

"The Cissy Belle," said Fountain slowly, enjoying every syllable, "is producing the gold which keeps the Hinton family in such style, with the only newly painted house in town."

"Then there's still gold in that hole! That expert from Continental Gold was wrong!" said McKay excitedly.

"There is no Continental Gold, therefore the expert was a fake," said Fountain

patiently, as though explaining to a child.

"That damned Hinton's fooled us for ten years!" McKay was injured.

"We don't know how much gold is there, but if a man with a pick could live off it, there's enough," said Fountain.

Felix Brand's eyes glittered at the sound of the magic word. He whispered, "Gold!"

"All men are alike, even you, Felix," chuckled Fountain.

The marshal relapsed into imperturbability. He said, "It still goes. No back-stabbing. Hangin' Dan Loper was wrong. You're operating here safe and sound, because I hold you down. Start anything that'll spoil it—and you'll have me to buck!"

Fountain said, "I know you're right, Felix. McKay here and that son of his have to be held down. But we want that mine. We started to get it once, and thought Hinton had sold to a powerful Eastern company and you made us lay off. But now we have only to—handle—Hinton."

"I'll arrest him on your warrant," said Felix. "Make it disturbing the peace. That'll stand up. You can pick the jury and we'll have him in jail. But it's not the pen."

"A man can be broken in any jail—even in ours," said Jay Fountain. "This county needs a new cell or two. Without windows. Thick walls." The cruel green eyes danced.

Felix stood up, a tall man, veteran of a dozen tough frontier towns, master of himself and of Random City when the guns began to shoot. He said, "I'll bring him in." He went out and got on the white horse. It was a fine animal, long-legged, pretty to look at, strong as rawhide. He rode west out of Random City. He knew where to look for Mosby Hinton now.

Yet, somehow he did not want to hasten with his task. He had never forgotten the shadow of Dan Loper's swinging body which had fallen across him when he returned to Random that day of the lynching. It was not the sight of a dead man, not the fact that he had been fairly friendly toward Loper which had given him pause. It was the fact that Jay Fountain and Mike McKay had seized an opportunity to take the law into their own hands.

It had taken him a year to batter them to submission. He had kept them from murdering Hinton. When the Cissy Belle had been purportedly sold he had felt an inner relief and had warned them against trifling with strong Eastern interests.

He was not a man thoroughly bad. He was hard, developed on the rough frontier where life was cheap, and he had shot down a score of characters who had opposed him. But he had always been on the side of the law, until he had fallen in with Jay Fountain and Mike McKay. Nowadays, remembering things to which he had turned a deaf ear and blind eye, he was slightly shamed.

Yet he had tried hard to put together a stake and get out, leaving his partners to their own devices. He had bought into mines, he had bet on horse races. There had been no luck for him in anything, and this also was a bad omen. He rode up the trail towards the hills, his gray eyes hard as agates, knowing in his heart that he could not resist the lure of gold, and that if Mosby Hinton resisted there would be another notch in the gun-butt which he had never whittled, but upon which was etched in his brain a scratch for every man he had killed. . . .

BACK in the bank, Jay Fountain still regarded his fingernails. After a long time he said, "Felix sort of has me scared. Guess I'm getting old."

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McKay took a drink from a bottle. His bull-like head rolled on his heavy shoulders.

"Felix is too damn' high-handed. My boy could settle this thing quick. He's got a grievance. Mosby cheated him. And he cheated you and me," he added.

Jay Fountain said, "Mike Jr. is a good boy. He can handle himself." The slanting eyes brooded, fixed upon those surly ones of the father.

"Panky and Whitey and Mike and the others could do the job," said Mike Sr. "But Felix and that damn' gun. . . . I'm scared of him too, Jay. I admit it."

"Sidewinder wasn't afraid of him," Jay Fountain reminisced. "In those days it was an equal partnership."

"Sidewinder was crooked as hell," said Mike Sr. flatly. "He deserved what he got. In fact. . . . "

"Never mind that," said the fat man hastily. "It's all gone and past. I was just wondering what young Mike and his boys are doing since Loper pinked Sorghum Bill."

Mike Sr. said, "I got them under control. But they're mighty hot. I hate to tell 'em Felix is handlin' the deal. They wanta go after Hinton."

There was another silence. Then Mike Sr. said, "You tell 'em, Jay."

"No," said Fountain.

Mike said, "You mean—you mean I should let 'em go?"

"We're sitting here in town," said Fountain. "Loper and Little Joe and Hinton and Felix are all in the hills. What have we got to lose if Mike and the boys go out too? They can help Felix, in case he needs it, can't they?"

"He don't want no help," said Mike fretfully. "He'll be awful mad if we send anyone."

"If Mike was my boy," suggested Jay Fountain softly, "and I was scared of Felix and tired of his ways . . ."

The two sat and stared at the whiskey bottle. Then old Mike swore mightily, took one more swig of the bottle and went abruptly from the bank.

Jay Fountain took his hands suddenly from the desk and shoved them into his pockets. He looked very old and pinched, and just a little frightened at what he had done. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Gold—and Blood

THE DAY was clear, and the morning sun hit the mountain peaks with a golden spray. Little Joe ducked swiftly into the mouth of the tunnel and said, "Felix is ridin' up the trail!"

Larry Loper gulped the last of his coffee. Mosby Hinton's eyes showed quick fear. They stepped out and squinted along the line which Little Joe's finger pointed out. Larry said, "Look behind him. There's six or eight of them!"

"Mike Jr. and his gang," said Mosby. "They're after me. Felix'll gun me on sight. Let me get my rifle. We can stand 'em off!"

"No," said Larry. "Bring up the horses, Joe."

"But it's perfect," begged Mosby. "We can lay it into them from the mine shaft. We can kill every one of them."

Larry said, "And go back and kill Jay Fountain and Mike McKay, too. Sure, we can—if we don't get killed ourselves. But what would that win us? We'd be outlaws, hunted by everyone."

Little Joe said, "Larry's right as rain. Shootin' people don't solve nothin'. Mostly, it's bad medicine."

"Felix is the law. He can shoot," said Mosby.

"Sure," nodded Larry. "So we go out of here. You know the back trails. Lead the way, Mosby."

"Where to?" demanded Hinton. "They'll follow us."

Larry was distributing the ore which Mosby had picked among the crevices of the cave at the mine mouth. "No one will look for gold right here. They'll think it's rubble. . . . Why, lead us back to town, Mosby. This thing's got to be settled in Random City, where it started."

Mosby groaned, "The boy's crazy . . .!" But he mounted his roan and led the way. Felix Brand was rounding the lower turn of the approach to the Cissy Belle and Mike McKay Jr.'s gang was a mile below him when the trio rode down the precipitous side of a cliff and headed for sparse timber which grew precariously on the south side of the mountain.

Mosby seemed to know the way, but there were times when Larry's heart stood still. They rimmed a precipice which dropped a sheer nine hundred feet onto sharp rock; they slithered down a shale bank which clattered and rolled beneath the hoofs of the willing, patient horses. They came out in a dry gulch at the bottom with the sweat pouring from them.

The way led across the flats, coming in on the blind side of Random City. Mosby Hinton had traveled it many times, going to and from the Cissy Belle, Larry knew. It led directly to the rear of the large, white, newly painted house on Vegas Street. It was noon when the lathered steeds were placed inside Mosby Hinton's barn and the door locked to keep them there out of sight.

In the house, the woman and the girl were silent, but Molly's excited eyes fastened upon Larry Loper. Mosby said to his wife, "You might as well know, darling. The Cissy Belle was never sold." He told the story to them, his voice low and trembling.

When he had finished, Cissy Hinton said, "You might have let me share it, Mosby."

"I was scared. After what they did to Dan. . . . I knew they were after the mine. All these years I've been playin' drunkard to throw 'em off," said Hinton. "I kept lookin' for an out, but one never came. I was ready to give up when Larry busted in." He brightened. "But now we got a chance. There's only three of us against the town, but at least, I got someone to side me."

Larry said briskly. "I want to know a couple of things. Why was Felix Brand riding so far ahead of the posse? And how much does Jay Fountain know about the Cissy Belle's fake sale?"

Molly said, "I've been watching. Felix rode out two hours ahead of Mike's gang. And day before yesterday Jay Fountain was over in Carbine."

Larry said slowly, "Those are straight answers. Seems to me Felix is not leadin' Mike McKay's men. And Jay Fountain knows everything about the mine."

Mosby cried, "Then they'll shoot on sight, and trump up charges later!"

"I expect there'll be some shootin'," said Larry mildly. "We just want to know where it's comin' from. We got some time. Let's scout around town."

"Show ourselves?" Mosby said.

"You better not," said Larry. "But Little Joe and I can take a chance. You stay here with the ladies. Have your gun ready and keep out of sight."

Molly said, "I can go places you couldn't. I'll watch for you, in case Marshal Brand comes back. He's dangerous, Larry. He's quick and cold."

"Yeah," said Larry. "I've met his kind before. You better not take a chance, Molly. . . ."

"It's now or never," said the girl stubbornly. She donned her sunbonnet and went toward the front door. "We've got a chance to get free of fear. I want to do my part. . . ." She went out onto Vegas Street.

"Free of fear," echoed her mother. She turned to Mosby. "It's been fear, hasn't it? You needn't be ashamed of it, Mosby. I'll never forget the night they murdered poor Dan."

Mosby's face was white and pinched. Larrry beckoned to Little Joe, and the two tiptoed out, leaving husband and wife together with their bitter memories and their new hope.

Little Joe said, "I'll mosey around Jay Fountain's bank. You take McKay's saloon. We got to listen and look. There's somethin' peculiar goin' on."

Larry said, "I'm beginning to guess what it is."

They parted, and Larry kept on, down Vegas Street. He saw Molly enter a neighbor's house, and he knew she was rounding up gossip items which might help. She was a brave girl, all right. Pretty as a picture, too. . . . Larry thought hard about her as he walked toward the Occidental.

A horseman came into town at top speed and Larry stopped short in the middle of the street. Beyond in a cloud of dust, rode the other men, coming in from the west. Marshal Brand swung down from his animal and spraddled his legs, his blank eyes going from the saloon to the lone man who waited.

Brand said, "Caught sight of you on that shale. You had Mosby with you. I got a warrant for him."

"Don't tell me your troubles," said Lar-

ry coolly. "I ain't interested. Got some of my own."

"I warned you," said the flat, dry voice. The dust cloud was getting bigger. "I told you to get out of town. Go saddle your nag and ride, Loper."

Larry said, "Maybe it'd be better if I didn't. Who's that coming in behind you?"

"I know who it is," said the marshal. "I can handle things here without you or anyone else."

Larry said, "Okay, Marshal. It's your deal. But I'm not leaving town just yet."

"I say you are!" The gray eyes were hooded now. Felix Brand was being pushed. He recognized the import of the band of riders who had followed him half the day. He had seen trouble brewing in the interview with McKay and that fat rascal, Jay Fountain. But he knew how to handle his partners. He had only to get inside the Occidental and face McKay, and that worthy would cringe and beg. Meantime, he had to keep the iron hand over Random City. He said, "And I mean *now!* Git!"

McKay would be listening, and the hangers-on in the bar would have their ears sticking out a mile, Larry knew. Little Joe had Fountain covered, and suddenly Larry knew that McKay would not interfere.

The men on the trail were appearing through the dust and big Mike Jr. was leading the pack. Larry's skin pebbled all over his body, then he was relaxed, ready. The first chink in the armor of the combined forces against him had appeared.

He said, "No man can tell me to git, Brand. Call your turn!"

★

MARSHAL FELIX BRAND was pushed for time. He had his back to the oncoming riders. He had things to settle, and fast, with his partners. Perhaps he had gone out too far on this limb, facing this steady eyed, husky young fellow. But he had to move and do it fast—and there was nothing so convincing to an embroiled mob as the sight of a dead man in the street. In one split second, Brand had to consider Larry Loper as a sacrifice to his personal god of fortune.

The marshal's right hand streaked to his gun. He had done this so many times, to such rhythm, that it was almost second nature. The dip downward, the swing of the wrist, the quick fanning with a horny palm. At such close quarters no amateur could miss, much less an experienced gun-thrower like Felix Brand.

His gray eyes never missed anything. In battle they came alight and burned at his opponent. He saw the young stranger make a creditable enough draw, but in his swift mind he knew he had Loper beaten.

He saw Larry turn sideways as his gun came out, thrusting his right hip slightly forward. But he never saw Larry's left hand fan the Colt, because that infinitesimal space of time was never utilized by Larry. The burst of flame was unexpected, the shock of the bullet was doubly blunt. . . .

Larry never lifted the gun. He merely turned his wrist outward, his palm down. He fired again. He saw Felix Brand whip about, saw the amazed expression on the marshal's face.

His own hat was gone. His first bullet had smacked the marshal, throwing his aim upward, and there was a hole in the new Stetson. Larry snatched it from the ground as men ran forth, disbelieving, from the Occidental, and Mike McKay Jr. led his young toughs into town.

Then Larry was running for the bank to pick up Little Joe. All hell would break loose now, he knew. With the marshal dead, young Mike would really strut his stuff. It looked like a pitched battle, with no law to step in. Larry had not wanted to kill Felix Brand for that reason. He was after bigger game. . . .

He gained the bank, saw Little Joe running to him. Joe panted, "Fountain just sashayed out the back door and over to McKay's place. What happened out yonder?"

"I had to down Brand," said Larry. "Was Fountain carrying a gun?"

"Not where you could see it," said Little Joe. "You got Brand?"

"Yes," said Larry. "We'll get Mosby and try some more. They'll be starting something, and we can fight. . . ."

"They've already started!" cried Joe. "Look!"

Young Mike McKay had swung down

from his horse. At that moment Molly Hinton came out of the house, which she had entered before the gun-fight, and started hastily for home.

McKay grabbed her by the arm and said something. She tried to pull away. McKay held tighter, finally dragged her across the street and down to the Occidental, his eight companions following.

Little Joe clung to Larry with both hands. He begged, "A dozen guns in there, and you wanta run in wild-eyed! Get hold of yourself first, Larry. This might be just the break we need."

Larry's lips were pale with rage. But he desisted, yielding. He said, "If they harm her, I'll clean the town."

"The town could stand it," said Little Joe. "Let's get her pappy and start."

★

JAY FOUNTAIN said, "Well, Felix is dead."

"Hinton cut across and came in the back way," complained Mike Jr. His face still showed bruises from the man-handling by Larry Loper. "They must of rode awful fast."

Jay Fountain said softly, "You botched it. You should have cut them off instead of following Felix and tipping your hand. Then you'd have had them all. You haven't got brains, Junior. You never had brains."

There was silence in the saloon. Mike Sr., behind the bar, was sullen. The others ranged around, watching Jay Fountain. The fat man sat in a chair, his back to the wall, his plump knees crossed, pink hands folded.

Young Mike blurted, "Don't tell me what to do, Jay, you're not boss over me."

Jay smiled faintly and looked at Mike Sr. Then the smile faded and the green eyes began to glow. Mike Sr. was ugly with thought. He would not look at Fountain. Jay said, "Getting ideas because Felix is dead, Mike? You think you and your son and his gang can run things without me?"

Mike mumbled, "You got no call to lace into Mike. He done like you said—followed Felix into the hills."

The fat banker said, "He also dragged that gal in here. Everyone in town will know it. People out here won't stand roughin' up a gal. You know that."

"Her old man's bound to come and git her," said Mike Sr. "He's wrapped up in that gal. And Mike allows he might marry her."

Jay Fountain exploded, coming off the chair in his vehemence. "You think Molly'd marry that big, ugly, good-for-nothing galoot? Have you all gone loco? Turn her a-loose and let's start thinkin' straight. There's trouble ahead. I tell you that we can't get away with it."

Mike Sr. said slowly, "Maybe *you* can't, but we aim to take over. We aim to get Hinton and his mine, and the gal too, if Mike wants her. We'll own the town. Who's to stop us?"

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MENDACO

Kays was an almost visible, solid object in the room. Jay Fountain put his tiny hands behind him and took two deep breaths. Then he said quietly, his eyes going around, passing lightly over them all, "Well, I guess nobody, Mike. I guess maybe you're right. You can make young Mike the new marshal and do what you please. I don't reckon anybody can fight all those guns you got behind you."

Mike Jr. said, "I told you so, Pop. He's through!"

"I'll just mosey along and watch the bank," purred Fountain. "Got a heap of money in there. Maybe Loper and them figure to raid it. I'll get my old gun and keep a watch."

He grinned vacuously around and tottered out the side door. Then he cut across lots, hurrying, fat legs twinkling at top speed. He was breathing heavily when he let himself into the bank.

The big safe was in a corner. Night was falling, and he pulled the shades, lighting a dim lamp. He dragged out two gunny sacks and with trembling hands began filling them. The buckboard was in the rear and he could drive all night with the fear of pursuit in him.

The game was up, he knew. After all these years, he would have to take what he could and go back East. It was ironic that the death of Felix, which he had planned, had set off the spark. The McKays had never before displayed any initiative. He had never imagined, in his wildest dreams, that they would take the bit in their teeth like this.

He had underestimated their stupidity and brutality. Grabbing the girl was the tip-off. They were crazy with lust for power. All these years they had writhed under the restraint of Felix, and that of Jay himself. Now, in the twinkling of an eye, they thought themselves in the driver's seat. They would kill Hinton and Loper and Little Joe, and then the war would be on, with every hand against them. The governor would make an investigation, and the deck would be stacked, in the end, against the McKays. Jay Fountain wanted no part of it. There had been enough murders. . . .

He gathered his booty and went silently out the rear door. It was quite dark, now. He was almost to the stable when the three figures stepped out and cornered him against the corral fence. He stopped and waited, knowing it was near the end. . . .

Larry Loper said, "We've been waitin' patiently for you, Fountain."

The fat banker said, "They got the gal in the back room. I didn't want any part of it."

"No," said Larry. "You're too smart. That's just what I figured when I had time to think about it. . . . Have they hurt her?"

"No. Mike wants to marry her," blurted Jay Fountain. "I'm leaving town, gentlemen. I'm taking my few personal belongings and getting out. The McKays are too much for me."

Larry said soothingly, "Repulsive, ain't they? Now you can just put your 'few personal belongings' down here, and we'll go along."

"Not me!" cried Fountain. "I'm finished with Random City!"

"Yeah," said Larry. "You sure are. But not quite yet. There's a little matter I want to take up with you later, about my Uncle Dan. Meantime, there's Molly Hinton. Let's go."

The fat man had to drop his bags of money. He placed them as far under the corral fence as possible, hoping against hope that he could rescue them later. He walked between Mosby Hinton and Little Joe.

Larry lingered, hefting one of the sacks. The faint clink of gold rewarded his ears. He grinned in the dark and hastened to catch up with the others. This was very promising indeed, he thought.

This looked like a good deal for Random City. Jay Fountain was a would-be absconder. The McKays were kidnapers. The law was clearly on the side of Larry and his friends. Whatever happened now, they were right—if they lived!

All afternoon he had fought himself to keep from going after Molly Hinton. He had stayed in the house, listening now and then to the sounds of revelry as the McKays savored their power, drinking quarts of liquor, letting off sixguns at the sky, so that every citizen of Random stayed fearsomly within doors. He had talked to

Cissy Hinton, taking strength from that staunch woman.

She said, "Your Uncle Dan would have rushed in there and been shot. That was his trouble. If you wait, they'll make a mistake. Let them take the first step."

Larry said, "I know you're right, ma'am. But it's hard, knowing they got Molly." He put Little Joe to watching the bank. Mosby Hinton just sat, his shoulders hunched, brooding. Several times he raised his tortured face and started to speak, but always refrained. And the hours dragged until sundown. . . .

And now they were holding Fountain with them as hostage. They headed straight for the side door of McKay's. Mosby said tonelessly, "There is only one way to the back room—through the bar, past all those guns. There's no rear door."

"You'll never make it," Fountain told them. "The McKays are dumb, but they'll fight."

"You mean they'll fight, but they're dumb," corrected Larry. "Suppose you start using your head, Fountain. It may save your neck."

The fat man was silent. They stood in the shadows, twenty yards from the side entrance. Through the window they could see men drinking at the bar, and a poker table at which sat the two McKays, and the closed door to the back room. Suddenly Mosby Hinton spoke in a voice new to Larry; a resonant, low, sure voice: "Larry is right. You go in there, Jay."

"No!" The fat man shivered. "They'll kill me. I. . . ."

Mosby Hinton had a long-barreled old frontier model in his hand. The muzzle hovered exactly where the patch pocket adorned Jay Fountain's flowered moire vest. He said, "You're going in, Jay. We've got you covered through that window. You're going in to play poker, Jay. Right now!"

"No!"

"Yes, you'll play poker. You'll cheat. I've been watching you for years, Jay. The other day I had you cold but you turned it on me. Fasten your little sleeve hide-out in place and cheat the McKays, Jay, like always."

"I—I haven't got the hide-out with me," pleaded the fat man. "You can't make me do this!"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Loper Comes Back

LITTLE JOE'S hand dipped into the sagging coat pocket and produced the wired contraption. He said, "So that's what it was. He sure stuck it on you, Mosby. I saw the cards myself."

Mosby said, "He planted them on me. He'd found out that the Cissy Belle wasn't sold and was trying to git me outa the way. He wasn't gonna let the McKays in on it. Get ready, Jay. I'm rememberin' another poker game now. . . ."

Fountain said quickly, "I'll do it."

"You start an argument with Whitey or Panky," said Mosby. "You invite them outside with you. We want that mob split and interested in something beside us."

"Right!" said Larry enthusiastically.

"I'll get killed!" Fountain wailed.

"That's okay with me," said Mosby cheerfully. "And you'll get ventilated right now, if you refuse. If you make a bad move while you're inside, we'll get you through the window, Jay. Did you ever see a fat man shot in the belly?" He jabbed the gun at Jay's vest pocket.

"I'll do it," he said. "Promise to save me, Mosby!"

"I'll give you the same break you gave others," said Mosby. "And it's a chance to get even with the McKays. What more you want?"

Jay said, "I— Nothing. You got me, Mosby."

He went to the door. He stood there a long moment, and Larry thought he might flunk it. But he went in.

They took their positions at the two windows and watched with bated breath. The McKays seemed surprised to see Fountain, but the fat banker pulled up his chair with such ease that from long habit they dealt him chips.

Mosby muttered in Larry's ear, "I been dreamin' of it, every night. It's more than a man can bear, to go through a thing like that. Dan was my partner. . . ."

"Shhh!" said Larry. "He's workin' the rig already."

They watched while Jay Fountain held out two aces, concealing them in the hold-out up his ample sleeve. The game went on. Panky and Whitey were in it, with

the two McKays. The gang at the bar was whooping it up.

Then Jay bent forward as Mike Jr. dealt. His well-kept little hands were quicker than light. He planted the two aces in the belt of Whitey.

A moment later Jay was pointing his finger at the gaping henchmen of the McKays, bellowing for justice.

Mike Jr. glowered at the two cards thus exposed. Mike Sr. cursed.

Jay shouted above the noise, his voice shrill. "I can handle this rascal! I'll meet him outside right now." And Jay's coat swung open, displaying the butt of a gun slung in an under-arm holster.

The men pushed back from the table, strewing chips on the floor, caught in a maelstrom of violence, Whitey protesting his innocence, and all were talking at once. They hurtled toward the door which led onto Vegas Street. The pool players abandoned their game, following.

Larry said, *"Now!"*

The trio surged in the side door. Larry hit the bartender with his fist and laid him among the empties. His shoulder hammered the portal of the back room. He went in and picked up the girl.

She said, "I knew you'd come, Larry."

He was out the side way and putting her down in a jiffy. He told her, "Go home and be ready for anything. I think we've got them."

She kissed him once, hastily, and said, "I'll do whatever you say—darling!"

Larry went back like a whirlwind. Little Joe had knocked a couple of heads together to keep stragglers quiet, and Mosby Hinton had a pair of the big guns.

Larry said, "Let's get them!"

He landed with his gun in his hand, facing them. Jay Fountain and Whitey were still wrangling. Mike Sr. caught sight of Larry and yelled, "That damned Loper!"

Mike Jr. rushed, swinging a fist and reaching for a gun at the same time. He was big and fast, as Larry well knew. Larry sidestepped and fired one shot. Mike Sr., just coming about with an ugly, sawed-off riot gun, plunged on his face.

Jay Fountain was screaming, "No! I just caught on. It's a bad deal, Mike!" Then the guns were rattling all around.

In the midst of the crazy action Larry saw Whitey fall down. Little Joe was moving right, so Larry went left. In center position Mosby Hinton's big revolvers spoke their deep-throated piece. McKay henchmen, not sure of where to attack, fell right and left or ran for shelter. Mike Jr. came with his weapon spouting fire.

Jay Fountain was trying to come around and cover Mosby Hinton. The fat banker was shorn now of all thought, except desire to get the man who had sent him toward certain death. The years were rolling back and Jay Fountain knew what Mosby had planned for him.

Mosby Hinton's right-hand gun leveled and held steady. Jay shot first, but Hinton's fire was true. Mosby went backward against the wall, his left-hand gun falling. But he kept the right hand up.

Jay Fountain tried to run. He made several steps, but he never gained a yard. He was running in the same place, the blood streaming down his flowered waistcoat. He was dead as a mackerel while he tried in his panic to escape.

Larry saw all this, absorbed it, even while he acted. Spinning sideways, he threw down carefully on Mike Jr. He got the gun dead center and pulled the trigger. Mike Jr. made a last effort to reach him with fist and weapon. It was as if a giant hand plucked him away, a foot short of his goal, and threw him violently to earth.

The shooting stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Panky was down. The McKays both lay in a welter of their own blood. Whitey gasped his last, still wondering how those aces got into his belt.

The others were wounded or running, leaderless, fully aware that their string had played out and that Random City was no longer a healthy place.

Larry blinked, then blew across his smoking gun-muzzle thoughtfully and reloaded. Mosby Hinton was standing against the wall of the Magpie House, a strange expression on his face. Larry said regretfully, "We killed my witnesses, Mosby. Mike Sr. and Jay Fountain will never talk again."

Mosby's voice was strong, as it had been when he forced Jay Fountain into the middle of the situation. He said, "You got Molly out, huh, Larry?"

"First thing," said Larry. "I meant to

slug Mike Sr. and save him. I wanted to know about Uncle Dan."

Mosby said, "I'll tell you. Jay put the same frame on me ten years ago that he did on Whitey, in there tonight."

"That's how you knew what to do!" said Larry.

"Yeah." Mosby paused. He had not moved. He leaned his head back, so that his eyes were on a level with Larry's. "That night we went outside with Sidewinder. He didn't have a gun. But he called me a name. I shot him, Larry."

"You—what? They said it was Dan's gun!"

"Dan made me swap guns." Mosby's eyes flickered, but with an effort he brought them into focus. "Dan always loved Cissy, and Little Molly. He said he'd fan outa here and they would never suspect me. Then they came, and I—I didn't tell them. He—they hung him. I never thought they would, but later I learned why.

"They were sore at Sidewinder, too. They wanted us all out of the way. They wanted the town and the mine. . . . But I fooled 'em on the mine, Larry— For Dan and Cissy and Molly. I played drunk and stupid all these years. It wasn't much of a life, Larry. I been paid for lettin' Dan hang. . . . And I ain't sorry—to—go!"

He leaned away from the wall and pitched against Larry with his full weight. Larry's hands went to support him and he was aware of a warm stickiness welling through Mosby's coat.

He carried Mosby to the light from the deathly hush of the Occidental. He saw the hole in the left breast of the jacket. Mosby's eyes were glazed, and he did not breathe. Larry placed him gently on the floor and covered his face with his flop-brimmed Stetson.

Little Joe said, "That's the end. It seems a shame. . . .

Larry straightened. He said, "Nobody knows all of it but you and me."

"We're pardners," said Little Joe briefly.

"We'll work that mine right," said Larry. "I reckon it's half ours—or the family's. We'll stick and do a job."

"Right, pardner," said Little Joe. "She's a rich mine. I looked close, and I'm a expert."

"Clean it up," said Larry. "Get the people. Tell them the bad deal in Random is ended. I got to gather up some things and get back to Molly."

He went by the corral for the gold and put it back in the bank where it belonged. He hated to face Cissy Hinton. But it had to be done. . . .

And then there was Molly. She had kissed him. . . . Yeah, a Loper had come back to Random City, to stay. . . .

THE END

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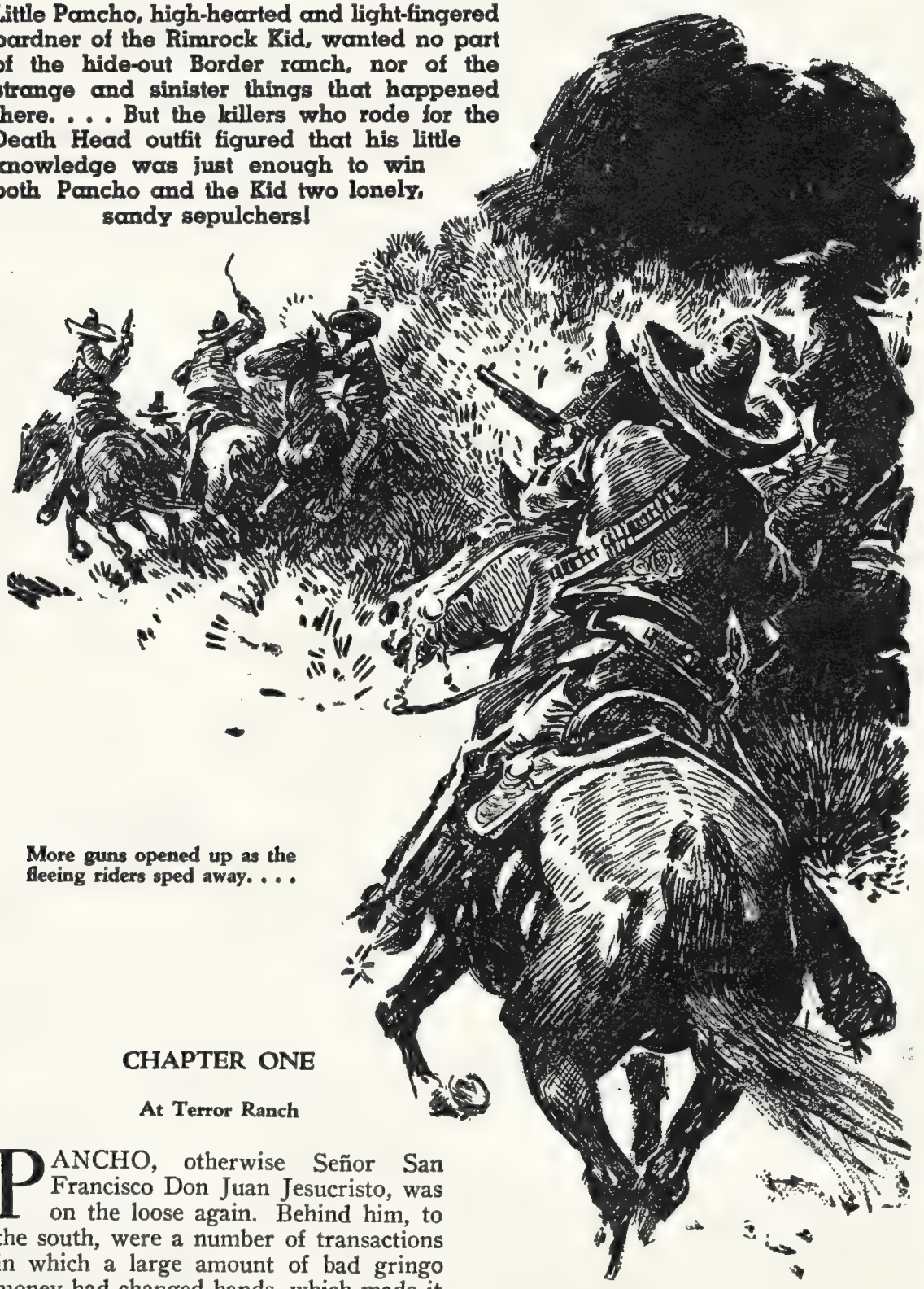


More guns opened up as the fleeing riders sped away. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

At Terror Ranch

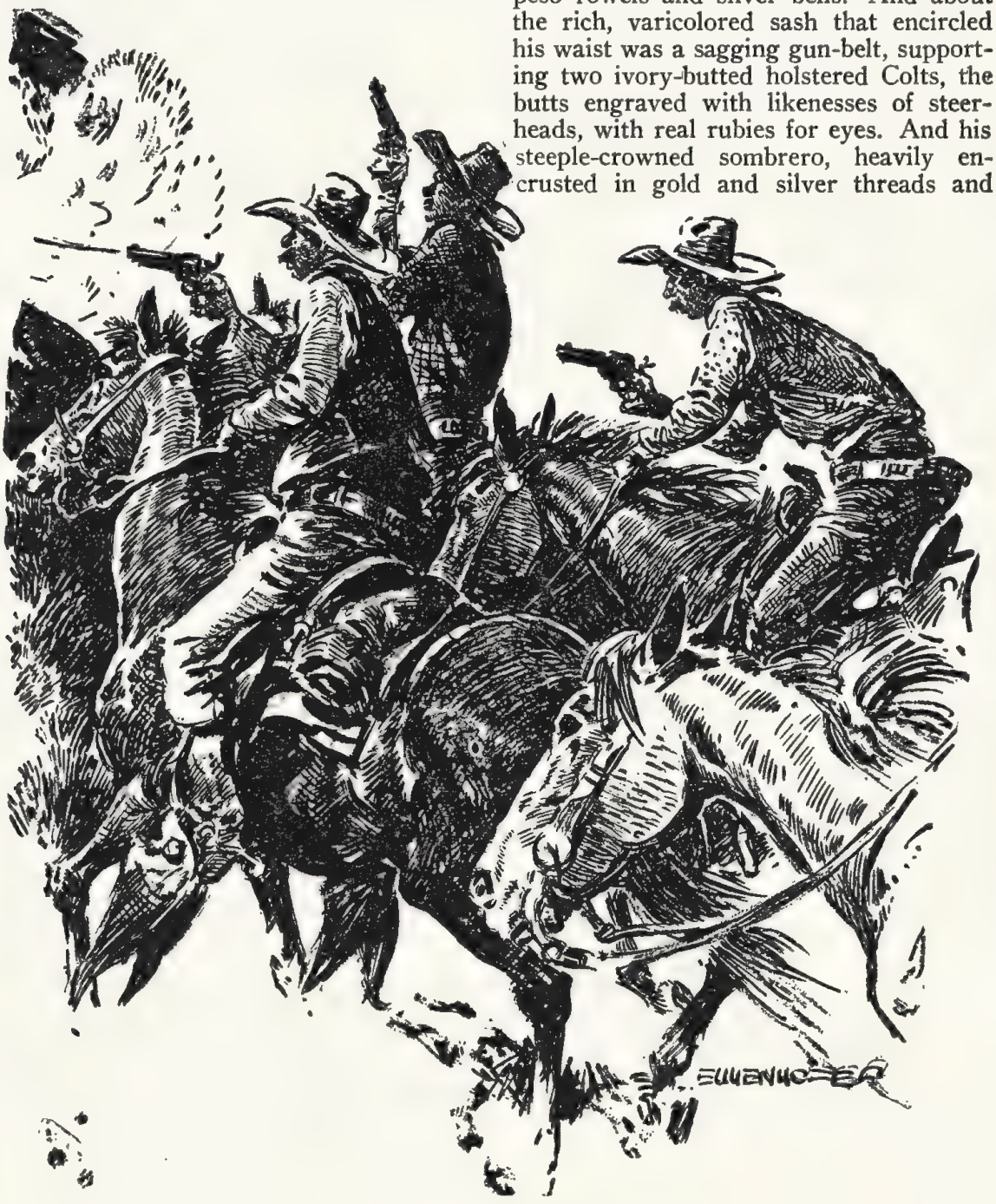
PANCHO, otherwise Señor San Francisco Don Juan Jesucristo, was on the loose again. Behind him, to the south, were a number of transactions in which a large amount of bad gringo money had changed hands, which made it highly desirable for him to head north

LEGION RIDES TONIGHT!

By Tom Roan

for the Border, as fast as the one-eyed Judas mule could carry him toward that sanctuary.

If his mount seemed a little the worse for wear, there was, however, nothing about Pancho's accouterments that savored of the burro's humbleness. Pancho's saddle was a gold-encrusted, hand-made affair that cost a thousand dollars, and the rest of the rig was in keeping. The finest patent leather boots encased Pancho's feet; his spurs were of hand-hammered silver, with peso rowels and silver bells. And about the rich, varicolored sash that encircled his waist was a sagging gun-belt, supporting two ivory-butted holstered Colts, the butts engraved with likenesses of steer-heads, with real rubies for eyes. And his steeple-crowned sombrero, heavily encrusted in gold and silver threads and



conchas, would have cost any cowpuncher a year's wages.

He was safe enough, now that he was across the Border, from the pursuing Rurales, so as he rode along the moonlit canyon rim, he was strumming lazily on a guitar, that was almost as large as himself —an instrument festooned with gay-colored silken ribbons. In his mouth he held a two-for-a-nickel cigar, which at brief intervals burst into a small, crackling blaze and spewed forth its volcano-like, strangling fumes.

Right now, he was looking forward to a date with his best friend, and neither the fact that he was several weeks behind time, nor that he was entering the most lawless land along the Border—the Billy the Kid country—bothered him at all. For the spirit of the dark, twisted trails ran hot in Pancho's blood; and as for the delay in making an appointment, mañana would be time enough to savor the enjoyment of the meeting. And besides, if he were really late enough—which he was—it would only give the Red Cliff Kid time to get over his mad spell at his little pardner's habitual delay.

He tossed away his cigar and started to sing, but the song was cut short as a scream knifed through the dark shadows ahead.

"Madre de Dios!" whispered Pancho. "What now would be this?"

Ahead and below, a light glinted through a mesquite thicket. Then, above the sound of water spilling down there came another scream, this time punctuated by a squall of pain.

The scream was from a woman; the cry of pain from a man. Another scream was cut short as if some one muffled it by a hand. With it came a slashing sound, cut short by another cry. And a man's voice followed, shouting at the top of his voice:

"No, no, señor! I swear we do not lie to you!"

Pancho turned off the trail, cautiously heading for the light, his movements screened by the brush. Yet, surely a man who had been chased for days by the Mexican police should have immediately lost himself in the hills.

But this was one of those things that the good Señor Red Cliff Kid could not have passed without investigating, and even Judas knew that the Kid was one who always tried to stay out of trouble.

The outlines of a house soon started taking shape in the shadows. Four glowing cigarettes in the darkness before it warned a man of the danger before Pancho caught sight of the seven horses standing at a lop-sided hitchrack.

Light from a fifth cigarette came from the shadowy bulk of a tall man leaning against the vine-entangled front door.

"I swear to you, Don Adolfo," a woman's voice pleaded inside, "all he has said is true. On my knees to God I say it! It was all in the place, the yellow men and the packages. I fed the men myself just before dawn. I went to the great hole in the cliffs to feed them again after the darkness had come, and they were gone."

Pancho eased on, unable to hear an answering voice. The black shadows of the mesquite still shielded him, and the sounds of the spilling water just beyond the north end of the cabin hid the light noise of the burro's hoofs in the sandy soil. He pulled up in the thick brush and trees within a couple of jumps to the long drop-off of the canyon rim itself.

He left the guitar behind, swinging from its ribbons on a little tree just ahead of where he tied Judas. An open window was in front of him as he eased through the foliage. Hat in hand he raised his head cautiously and looked inside, his eyes widening.

★

THE long, low room in front of him had once held something of pretentiousness, but now the black wood beams were sagging, the furniture rickety. In a huge fireplace a smouldering blaze was glowing, a few little flames lolling weakly.

Pancho scarcely saw all that. His dark eyes were glued toward a black-belted, giant, bared to the waist, in front of the fireplace. He was a monstrous brute with a closely-shaved head, and wore broad bracelets of silver on his wrists and highly polished gold discs swinging in the lobe of each ear—a towering bull of a man, over six feet tall who looked a yard wide across the chest. Slung across his right

shoulder was the braided butt of a seven-foot blacksnake whip. A six-shooter hung at his right hip and a long knife with a curving blade and a jeweled hilt rode high against his belly.

Pancho had never seen a broader, meaner face and a round head that looked so much like a cannonball. At the giant's feet lay a fat, white-haired Mexican lying face-forward on the floor. The big devil's left foot was planted firmly on the back of his neck to hold him there. On his back were a dozen crimson welts.

"Mercy, Don Adolfo." The woman's voice was sobbing in Spanish, "My Manuel has always been one of your most trusted servants."

Pancho glimpsed her cowering in a corner beyond the giant, a coarse woman of fifty or more who looked as if she, too, had tasted the whip. The man to her right, sitting in a straight-backed chair with his shoulders squared against the front door, was almost as fascinating as the giant.

He was as tall and thin as a sapling, an old man with a skin like wrinkled saddle leather, and garbed like a Spanish dandy. Talon-like hands rested on the gold head of a tall cane, the left one holding a silver snuff-box. A black cape with a scarlet lining was flung around his shoulders. The thin face under the flat-brimmed black hat was carefully plucked of every hair, the face of a bird of prey, the eyes two dark-golden jewels. He took a pinch of snuff, poked it up each thin nostril, then he spoke, his voice impatient and quavering.

"Roll him over on his back and try the belly a stroke. Perhaps he plays the 'possum, no?"

The woman started crawling forward. "Do not kill him—"

"Back, wench!" The old man's cane drove the woman back. "I do not lose fifty thousand dollars in a single day without demanding an accounting!"

As the woman dropped, sobbing on the floor, Pancho's eyes were on the big devil again. He had given the man on the floor a lifting shove with his foot, rolling him over. The big hand holding the whip arose. As it poised for a stroke, Pancho's hand closed on the butt of a handsome Colt. But the weapon was never so much as loosened in its sash. Something happened from another direction.

Into the candlelight, coming through another open window overlooking the canyon, a light had leaped, a flash that seemed to fling from nowhere without a flicker of warning. It sped across the room, then a *whang!* as if some one had hard-thumped the bass string of a guitar as it struck its furious stroke.

The giant, in incredulous, half-smiling surprise, looked up at his big fist above his head, his eyes gradually widening. For the fist that held the whip was pinned solidly to the old hardwood beam by the quivering blade of the long knife that had flown through the window.

"Well, well," croaked the old thing against the door, taking another pinch of snuff, "on with the stroke, Samson the Bull, or have you lost your stomach for your work?"

"As usual," intoned the giant in calm voice, "Don Adolpho sees nothing and hears nothing until it is done. My stomach has lost nothing. If you will lift your eyes from your snuff-box you will see that a knife has come in from the outside and my hand is pinned to the wood. There is an enemy in the darkness beyond the window."

CHAPTER TWO

Gunmen in the Dark

PANCHO fell back, all foolish thought of poking his nose into this mad business gone. The strange calm inside the house was shocking enough to scare the wits out of a man.

It had been as the giant had said: Interested only in his infernal little snuff-box, the old one had not seen or heard the knife. He took another pinch of snuff, and by that time the giant had reached up, caught the hilt of the knife and freed himself.

Don Adolpho had called the giant Samson the Bull, and he was all that now without the slightest hesitation about it. He charged the window with a rush. There was a chair in the way, but he made no more attempt to avoid it than a bullet would have stopped at a thin sheet of glass. He tore into it, the old wood shattering and flying into wreckage, and in one long bound he was out the window

and wheeling to his right. A stone came hurtling out of the darkness and broke into a dozen splattering pieces against his chest.

Pancho turned to look, as a cry of terror lifted, a fierce wail of near-dying anguish. Samson the Bull had caught a slender youth of seventeen hiding in the bushes. As lightly as one would handle a pillow filled with feathers, the giant swung his kicking victim above his head, and turned toward the rim while the terrified youth struggled and cursed him in Spanish.

"I threw the knife and it was no fault of mine that it struck the hand when it should have split your brain! May my ghost follow you every day of your life until you die!"

The giant's outburst of roaring laughter was half drowned in a long, thin cry as the victim was flung, all kicking legs and flinging arms, spinning downward to the rocks and the water far below.

"It was the youth Pedro, eh?" Don Adolpho arose and walked to the window, pinching his snuff with the same fine air as he calmly looked out. "I have always said he was too handy with the knife."

"And a good thing," growled the giant. "that his aim was not a little better, or I would have had more than a mere scratch on the hand!"

"That's no scratch, Samson!" The men who had been smoking in front of the house appeared now. A big red-headed Americano stopped with four wide-eyed men behind him, all of them staring at the giant's maimed hand. "Hell, that would be enough to put an ordinary man's gun-hand outa workin' for two or three weeks."

"Señor Bob Beardlee," smirked the giant, "I am no ordinary man. Me, I am a bull!" He slaped his chest with the bloody hand. "Go back about your own affairs and the don and myself will continue with the business of old Manuel—"

"What's that?" The red-head cut him off, staring at the slope to southward where something sounded as if shale along the top was moving. "Pedro wasn't the only one here! *Listen!* That's horses up there on the break—an' we run or fight now!"

Pancho's heart seemed to have stopped beating by this time, and when the red-beard pointed in his direction he was sure that his end was at hand. He reached the blacker shadows and dropped to a squat like a rabbit hiding in the bushes. The redhead, he knew, had not spotted him, but he could hear hoofs behind him, and it looked as if he had been trapped between two lines of danger that would close in on him at any moment.

"We will withdraw for the time," intoned Don Adolpho. "To the horses. And mind your mouth, Anita Costello!" He sent that warning to the woman. "Of course we will return, and perhaps you and your no-good old liar and thief of a Manuel will know that I stand for no play in any of my affairs. *'Sta bueno.*"

The others were like men ready to flee from their own shadows, but there was no rush on the part of the don or the giant until they reached their horses. They were swinging into their saddles when a challenging voice above Pancho roared through the night.

"Halt down there, or we'll open fire!"

"Shoot, damn yuh!" ripped back Bob Beardlee's voice. "Yore hell-fired gun ain't loaded!"

"It's the Skull Head crowd!" A shot tore out of the brush with that, the report filling the darkness and moonlight. "Gun hell out of 'em!"

"Scatter!" That was a shriek from the don.

A general roaring of guns drowned the most of the noise of the pounding hoofs. The don's men were fighting back, hanging low on their saddles, the jerky fire of their six-shooters stabbing ribbons of red at the brush. More guns were opening up until the fleeing gang sped into a dense wall of mesquite and were gone, leaving only a mocking wail of laughter floating back.

"Por Dios!" hissed Pancho, buck-jumping to his feet now and reaching for his guitar with a shaking hand. "Theese ess no place for poor leetle Pancho and the one-eyed Judas!"

"Who knows?" droned a voice in Spanish that jerked Pancho to a stiff halt. "One move, little one, and I blow the backbone through the belly."

The muzzle of a six-shooter protruded from a clump of brush, the big hand of a fat Mexican with drooping black mus-

taches behind it, and the round bore pushed hard against Pancho's spine. The round face of the gunman was coldly smiling, a man to whom death would mean no more than the slow and steady squeeze of the trigger.

"Steady, señor," whimpered Pancho. "I am honest and a friend to all men, I swear it—"

Another voice chuckled in English, "Pancho, you skinflint little rake! Where's your one-eyed jackass?"

"Señor Keed!" Pancho almost made the mistake of starting to lower his hands all too quickly, but a harder jab of the six-shooter's muzzle sent them jerking skyward again. "My good friend in the dark, tell the man not to shoot poor Pancho. I am as sinless as the saints, and most honorable among men . . . except for a little trait or two."

"Ease up on him, Leonardo," chuckled that familiar voice as the tall figure came out of the darkness. "He's that damned little wart I've been telling you about. But be careful with your new store-bought teeth, or he'll soon have them in his confounded pocket!"

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PANCHO drew an easier breath. The coming of the Red Cliff Kid was like rain to a man in the desert. One could quickly forget the big Mexican with his fat face and his big six-shooter. When the Red Cliff Kid was up and about, he would see no man shot in the back!

More than a dozen others were swarming up as if the shadows themselves were turning to men. Every one of them was armed to the teeth, and most of their good horses left under guard in the brush behind them.

"Where," the Red Cliff Kid demanded, stepping back as he eyed Pancho up and down, "did you get all the fancy duds, monkey-britches?"

"Señor, eet ees what you call the long story." Pancho could twist out a little grin now that the burly Mexican had taken the muzzle of the six-shooter away from his back. "And maybe, señor," he shrugged, "it was a case where Pancho was lucky for once in well, let us say the blackjack game. . . ."

"And as usual, Pancho lies!" The Kid clamped a firm hand on his shoulder, blue eyes narrow. "We were in a town they called San Gabriel. They were about to hang me for robbing a bank and killing a man I never saw. You got me out of jail and we saw where the bank had been handling counterfeit money which they had planted on another man they had killed. While I was trying to slip it back in the bank as evidence of their crookedness—well, you helped yourself to a sizable chunk of it just as soon as my back was turned."

"Señor, you seem to know much of the truth," the little Mexican's grin was uncertain now. "But," he shrugged, "what could poor Pancho do? For a year there were no clothes, or no boots for my feet. A man can not go about naked can he, Señor Keed!"

"Go on!" ordered the Kid bluntly. "You got away from me and headed across the Border with a promise to meet me here seven weeks ago. How did you get along?"

"Well, señor," Pancho's grin widened, "of course you did not know I stole the money from the sack, but it was ver' good money. Sí, sí, they took it as well as any one would take money in the small towns on the other side. I lived like a king. In one place I met a señorita. Oh, señor, she was the most beautiful of the beautiful. I left Judas in the town, and we journeyed on the train to Mejico City. But they soon had out the police, running poor Pancho up and down, and all he could do was to flee and let the señorita go. All she wanted was money, anyway. I came back to the village, and there in the night—well," he finished simply, "poor Pancho had to saddle up and head this way."

"Where'd yuh get it, Kid?" A burly gringo, bearded like a pirate, had come up to stop and stare, and Pancho felt himself cringe inwardly. "Where's the string to go 'round its neck an' yore hand-organ to grind out tunes! I thought I'd seen it all, but this monk tops the pile!"

"Let him alone." The Kid pushed the man to one side. "This is Pancho, Dave. He's all right—when he's asleep! This is Dave King, Pancho, sheriff of Los Gatos. . . ."

"Señor," said Pancho, "what bad com-

pany you keep each time I am not around to watch you!"

"What's he doin' here, Kid?"

Pancho told them. King listened, frowning and stroking his brown beard with a big paw. He nodded when Pancho was through, and turned to stare back at the house.

"An' old Manuel Costello an' his Anita," he growled, "are in there lyin' their heads off. Come on an' listen to 'em."

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THEY followed him, and Pancho was surprised when they were in the house, for a half-circle of men were standing in front of Manuel and his wife. Manuel was very much alive now. He had put on a ragged shirt so quickly he had not had time to poke the tail of it into his cotton trousers.

"Upon the word of an honest man," he was whimpering, "the men came and stopped here only for water. The big spring is there," his hand indicated a spot against a high rise of rocks, with the good water spilling down and over the rim. "Many people stop here, for in this country one does not refuse water to man or beast."

"That's a nice little tale, as usual, Manuel." King stepped forward. "Take off that shirt and let us see your back. If this little fella ain't lyin'—"

"But, *señor,*" Manuel's eyes widened, "I take cold quickly when I take off the shirt at night—"

"Hombre, you lie!" snapped Pancho, moving forward and looking straight into his eyes. "I was just beyond the window when the big one was whipping you. I was there when the knife came through the window and the giant leaped outside a minute later to seize a young one and throw him off the cliffs! And you, woman," he whirled upon the pop-eyed Anita, "where is the great hole in the cliffs where you fed the yellow men?"

"The little one is a fool!" shrieked the woman, surging to her feet. "Manuel's back is cut by the sticks I laid upon it when I whipped him for—" she floundered for just an instant—"not attending the goats! Eh, Manuel, is that not true? Do I not often beat you for being such a lazy one?"

"Sí, sí," nodded Manuel. "It is the truth, the word of an honest woman. I swear it!"

"Scared to death to talk," growled King. "Same old story with everybody in this whole damn' country. All right, you two." He glowered at the woman. "One of these days we're goin' to hang yuh an' that lyin' man of yores to the same limb. ight now I've got a good notion to take yuh both to town an' the jailhouse."

"No, *señor!*" Manuel was suddenly on his feet, hands lifted and his voice trembling. "People have gone there only to be shot through the window. We would be in— *Oh, señor!*"

The sheriff had suddenly buckled at the middle, face twisting in rage. His right fist landed like a hammer on the point of Manuel's jaw.

He went backward over the bench and landed with his head in the fireplace.

CHAPTER THREE

Two Corpses—and Hell to Pay!

PANCHO leaned to whisper to the Kid on his Black Ball horse as they rode away behind the rest of the crowd. *"Por Dios,* he is a very strong one and no more than forty, though the beard makes him look older. I could not hit a man standing with his hands up and pleading like that."

"Keep your mouth shut," warned the Kid. "There's going to be a hell of a lot of things around Los Gatos you won't like, little one; but you'll soon learn that there's not much you can do about it. Very few men in this crowd like Dave King. But it's a big game we're playing."

They were silent for a long time. Leonardo André, the Mexican who had shoved the muzzle of the six-shooter against his spine in the darkness, dropped back to ride just to Pancho's left.

The picture they had left behind them was one that did not set well in a man's memory. Dave King had gone far enough to kick Anita Costello when she had leaped forward to drag her unconscious Manuel out of the fireplace. The sheriff might have a lanky old deputy called Troop Calvert who had pushed him toward the front door and growled something into his left ear that brought his sanity back.

A merciless, bloody drama was playing itself out here on the Border. Old Manuel and his Anita were only a small key. At the last moment King had decided to leave them behind. The sheriff had not offered to send a single man to help them bring up the body of the youth the giant had thrown off the rim. Death here, like spilled milk, was not to be cried over or regretted.

"It is a very bad thing when rich men start to cut each other's throat." Leonardo grumbled in a low voice. "Sometimes I wish I had stayed in my mountains of Chihuahua, where one may see less to eat but also less blood."

"I know Chihuahua," nodded Pancho. "Also Durango, Sonora, Coahulla and most all the others. I am a far-traveled man."

"The ass looks it," grinned Leonardo. "He has but one eye, and ears like the fog horns on the oceans. Some one must have paid you well to take him off their hands. I have never seen an uglier brute."

Pancho growled, suddenly looking daggers at him. "Even with the fine saddle!"

"With sixteen saddles covered with brass and tin," grinned Leonardo.

"Lay off, Leonardo!" warned the Kid. "You two, I think, are going to hit it off well enough when you get to know each other. Pancho picks a mean guitar, and you whang a wicked jew's harp, but don't crowd him too much with your jokes."

"Let him alone," frowned Pancho, fingering his knife hilt. "A few more ugly words from his big mouth about my good Judas and I will slit his fat belly!"

Dave King and the lanky Troop Calvert were in the lead with five men close-trailing them a few rods ahead of the eleven riders behind. As they swung on over the crest, following a seldom-used old cattle trail, King's bunch seemed gradually to draw even farther ahead while those behind appeared to string.

A few lights in Los Gatos lay low in the distance between two blunt hills that formed the mouth of a canyon. The lights disappeared soon afterwards as the slope bent downward between two big humps crowned with dark piñons. King and his little crowd rode right on into the break, as if looking neither to the right or left, but it was here that the horsemen behind him started splitting as if a wedge was being driven between them.

It was one of those moves where even the one-eyed burro should have been able to figure. It was clear now that the majority of this bunch did not trust the judgment of the sheriff. The two lines of horsemen heading for the piñon thickets had at once become tense, a number of them swinging up their rifles across the laps.

A glance at the Kid's face in the moonlight showed him tensed, the shifty eyes studying every blob of shadow. It was the same with the big Leonardo, who had slid his Colt forward, keeping a hand close to its black butt.

Pancho did not have to have his friend write him a letter to tell him there was danger around them here in this wild country! They crossed the humps in silence, the way clearing below, and the tension relaxing.

Dave King and his group were far ahead now. They had reached the foot of the slope and were letting their horses out into a slow gallop with a bannering cloud of dust lifting lazily behind them. They were out of sight by the time the others had reached the foot, and now the main group started pulling up into an abrupt half-circle as a tall, gray-bearded rider in the lead swung his horse around to face them.

"Yuh may think," the man was saying, "that I'm kinda over-cautious, boys, but I ain't. I ain't fooled, an' yuh ain't fooled. Four nights ago a bunch of us was led into ambush in a place a lot like this. It might have been one of them accidents, but it's happened so many times it's beginnin' to look bad. When men ride behind me I try to protect 'em. . . . I guess that's all I've got to say."

★

OLD LARK WALKER'S short speech before turning to ride on was no surprise to the Red Cliff Kid; no surprise to any one. It was a simple case of one out-and-out reprobate refusing to trust another. For everybody in the country knew that Lark Walker was as crooked as a bullsnake.

The kid had never found himself hooked

horn to horn to a meaner mess. There were four big cattle and horse outfits here. Larkin's huge Broken Heart spread began in the hills at a point eight miles to southward. Don Adolpho Chávez's Skull Head hugged the Border for miles to northward, the ideal place for anything. East of him, running the same ugly skull brand except for the addition of crossed bones beneath it, lay the La Casita del Angel, owned by the don's son, the smart young Don Doroteo Chávez; and east of Lark Walker lay the Hammer & Tongs, owned by the Far West Cattle & Land combine, and managed by old Bill Brazos, president of the bank in Los Gatos.

All the little-fry outfits were gouged in where they were able to get a foothold. For years they had held on by the skins of their teeth, none of them big enough to stage war against the hogs and wolves who were closing in on them. But now the big hogs and wolves had turned upon themselves, and the small-fry outfits were led to believe they were getting some benefit out of this dangerous game, where one could hire his guns to an outfit supposedly big enough to protect him. Between all the fires rode the damnable Dave King, taking parts in the play that seemed to thoroughly root him to one side today, another tomorrow.

King was like scores of others, here in this country shrouded in dark secrets and baffling mysteries; a land where the wisest man was rarely certain as to who was his friend or actual enemy. This strip of wild territory had long been known as an ideal spot for smuggling.

Gun-running was popular here; cattle and horses were shuttled from one side to the other through the canyons. Orientals handed over fat pokes of gold and silver to get themselves slipped in. With them, ahead of them or behind them flowed drugs and all the contrabands one could find listed in the books. Where the little-fry had once dabbled in it, the big hogs and the wolves had taken over, and the small outfits were simply hired to do the riding and fighting, the stealing and the lying.

It had become neighbor against neighbor, father against son, and son against father. Even the Red Cliff Kid had a secret or two that he would not yet confide in Pancho.

But there was no chance to talk to Pancho about anything yet. Adventure was adventure to that runt, and it made little difference whether it came in a pretty face, the flash of a knife in the dark or the roar of a gun. Trouble to him—either ragged and barefooted, or dressed like a fighting cock on parade—was merely sunshine and rain, and who would be foolish enough to kick about it!

As they rode on toward Los Gatos, Pancho swung his guitar around in front of him and started his strumming. Leonardo listened and watched him narrowly for a minute, and produced his jew's harp. With a few strokes he had struck up the tune and their near-quarrel that could have ended in quick bloodshed was forgotten.

Los Gatos seemed to be bustling from end to end, and every window was shining with lamplight. Half-dressed people crowded the street, as if they had hastily jumped from their beds to their trousers. And the main jam stood before the porch of a saloon with a high false front on the south side of the street.

Dave King and his little group had pulled up long before the riders with the Kid and Pancho reached the scene. King was standing with one foot on the low steps. Silence held him rigid as he stared at two men in front of him who were lying on their backs on the bloody planks with the saloon lamplight falling upon their dead faces.

"Who knows who shot them or why!" A barefooted Mexican was half-quarreling with another. "Who knows who shoots anybody these days with so much killing going on? I tell you I was asleep. I heard horses coming down the street, and Los Gatos knows as much of the rest as I could know.

"There was no talk or crying out as men angry with each other would quarrel. There was only a quick barking of guns, and the sounds of the horses snorting and falling where they now lie dead just up the street. I heard only one man cry out then in a hurt voice, and then people were rushing to pick up the two men and bring them here. The dark one was dead as they lifted him from the ground. Now the big gray one is not far from it. And that, hombre, is all I know of it."

"Yep, I know 'em both." That bit of information came from a shaggy old rough-boot standing in a little group just in front of the Kid as he swung out of his Black Ball's saddle. "The big bird's Buckshot Sam Marlin, a deppity United States marshal from Santa Fé. The Mexican beside 'im is a high-knocker in the Rurales 'crost the Border. There's goin' to be somethin' more to this job than just haulin' 'em off up to the graveyard. Somebody in this man's town, gents, has overshot the dose. These two kills mean hell to pay!"

It looked like the hell was already to pay a minute later. A great cloud of horsemen was coming down the canyon, a grim-faced lot out for business, with carbine butts bobbing in their saddle boots and shining in the moonlight.

"Carramba!" hissed Pancho just behind the Kid. "Señor, eet ees United States cavalrymen who now come, eh, no?"

"Let's get in the clear," whispered back the Kid. "Come on, but don't make it a rush."

CHAPTER FOUR

Cave of Missing Men

HE LED the way as quietly as he could. They crossed the street in the scattering crowd with Pancho and his Judas at Black Ball's heels. Leonardo André and his big, wall-eyed dark horse were supposed to be somewhere behind in the hastily stirring mass of humanity.

Dave King, rarely ruffled in any event, had turned and was staring up the street with his face now hard in the moonlight. Troop Calvert was beside him, an old ramrod, stiff in his tracks and gumming a little chew of tobacco.

The Kid entered a narrow passageway between two-story buildings at either hand.

"I keep Black Ball here," announced the Kid as they entered the dark hallway. "An old Mexican still tries to keep the joint going. I didn't want to hang around back there and have soldiers keep us lined up for hours while some officer takes his good time to question us."

"But, señor," growled Pancho, "maybe you can tell me what you are doing here, now that we do not have Leonardo's fat ear poked against us listening to every word. Never do I see you but what you are in trouble. What is wrong, Señor Keed. . . ? I—am—hurt!"

His last words came in startled gasps. The Kid had come to a halt and was trying to find a match in his pocket. He wheeled on his heel as Pancho's last word ended with the sound of a blow and a groan. Now the Kid sawed back, trying to get his hand out of his pocket as a grunt of alarm came from his own lips.

It was an attack in the dark. The Kid's big hat flew off when the braided butt of a quirt fell across his shoulders and the side of his neck.

He went down, bursting shower after bursting shower of many-colored pinpoints of light appearing to fill the air around him, voice and breath knocked out of him. He came up in a daze, a wiry figure trying to fight. Another blow found him, swinging straight to the point of the jaw, and it was like a full-grown ham slamming through the darkness with a ton of weight behind it. He went down again, this time with all consciousness smashed out of him as quickly as a candle flame vanishing in a sudden gust of wind.

There was no way of telling how long he was down, or what had happened to him. He was vaguely conscious of jolting and rocking along through a thick fog with his hands tied behind him. His hat had been jammed back on his head and a dry lump filled his mouth with the long ends of the lump at either side of it pulled back and tied firmly behind the base of his skull to hold it in place. It took time to know that the thing was a gag and that he was back in Black Ball's saddle, going somewhere at a racking pace that jarred him from head to heel.

His eyes were open, and below him he heard brush whipping his stirrups. It was not long after that before the whispery thumping and plunking of a stumbly music came to him. Now he remembered Pancho and the big guitar.

But it was not Pancho this time. He discovered that Pancho was just to his right, jogging along on Judas at a fast trot. The Mexican's fine hat was only a wad on his head, held in place by the

braided strap under his chin. A big handkerchief with a knot in it also filled his mouth and covered him from the nose downward. His hands were behind him, the grand six-shooters gone from the many-colored sash, and the big guitar missing from its usual riding place on his back. In short, Pancho now looked like a once-fine bird, just about ready for somebody's pot.

The music was coming from the left, and the Kid let his bobbing head turn as he looked in that direction. Through the thinning fog he saw a burly man on a tall horse with Pancho's guitar against his belly. A broad, thick hand was lightly stroking the strings. The face above the hand was marred by the shadows for a few moments. Then a turn of the man's head let the pale moonlight fall full upon it, and it became the face of Leonardo André, fat and smiling as usual, the eyes mischievously dreamy as he sought to master some near-forgotten tune.

It did not occur to the Kid even to wonder what Leonardo André was doing there. Leonardo André was supposed to be the best friend he had in Los Gatos, until Pancho came along, since the first day the Kid had ridden into the town with the guardedly spoken intention of hiring his guns to the highest bidder.

By the sounds that now cleared in the Kid's ears he could tell that there were four horsemen bringing up the rear, but he was staring at the hatless horseman ahead of him. He had seen that yard-wide back before. A blood-red blanket that had become purple in the moonlight was flung loosely around the man's massive shoulders, but any one who had ever had so much as a glimpse of that hombre would never forget him.

The rider was Samson the Bull, old Don Adolpho Chávez's hired strong-arm man. The Kid was still staring at him, wondering what Samson the Bull was doing here, when a sudden harsh voice to his left jarred him back to Leonardo.

"Do not mutter behind your gag and glare at me, señor!" snarled the Mexican, suddenly lifting the big guitar threateningly. "I do not like it, and am in the mood to smash this box over your head for it! From the day you arrived in Los Gatos, you were suspected of being a government spy, and the good Don Adolpho set me to watch you. I was never your friend except in pretense, to make the bigger fool of you. You were a smart one, hombre, but just four days ago you received a letter in the post office—a small and most dainty letter. The writing was that of a girl and the smell of it sweeter than the flowers."

He paused for a moment to chuckle. "Sí, sí, a love letter by all the looks and scent, but you did not know that old Tarrazas in the post office was in the pay of the good Don Adolpho. The letter was read and all the words copied before it was given to you through the little window."

He leaned forward, eyes bright and piercing, face a broad, flat leer in the moonlight. "The letter was not from some fair señorita. It was filled with orders, and the orders came from the Señor Buckshot Sam Marlin, the man you looked at so casually as he lay dying in the lamplight on the porch of the saloon behind us. You thought you were smart, but you are only a fool who tried to play at war, and now you and your simple-minded friend, who looks like a monkey, are prisoners on your way to pay the penalty for your spying. Where you are going there are others who have thought themselves smart. Before long, who knows but what Pancho will bring a fair price when tossed back across the Border into the waiting arms of the Rurales?

"And the soldiers who came tonight!" he rocked back in his saddle and laughed mockingly. "What can they do? Don Adolpho is smarter than all of them. He will do to the officer in charge as he surely will do you, señor. He will have Samson the Bull slice off his ears, and then cut him to pieces with the whip!"

★

THEY could not have been very far north of Los Gatos when they were galloping up a gravel and rock-floored little stream of swift water that ran along a deep canyon, a place so narrow that they had to ride single file, their stirrups scraping rock at either side, while Samson the Bull continued to lead the way.

The place was ideal for any number of men to drop out of sight as if the world had opened and swallowed them. No hoofprint would remain in the swift, shallow stream. But it was only the beginning of the things that were to come.

The way widened into a narrow gorge with overhanging rocks almost coming together in their reach high overhead. Daylight broadened above them, as they rode on, past gigantic rocks that were honeycombed with the dark, gaping mouths of caves.

Samson the Bull kept to the stream until he was ready to make his turn to the west. The giant's big shoulders brushed the undergrowth aside as he humped his huge frame forward, until they were entering a narrow black hole in the rocks. There he paused to strike a match to a rich pine torch.

"*Maria santissima,* but it is dark!" growled the big Leonardo. "If my horse does not fall and break my neck I will be a lucky man, no, Samson?"

The giant ignored him. He rode steadily on, a statue in his saddle looking straight ahead, the drum of hoof-beats broken now and then by the slow spill of water coming to them from somewhere in the darkness ahead. An hour must have passed before a light showed ahead and a sharp voice in Spanish challenged them:

"Let the word be given!"

"The puma fears no darkness!" The giant spoke for the first time. "I arrive with company for the company."

An iron-bound door was now swung open, and a wolfish looking man with a lantern burning on a shelf of rock above him stepped to one side as the giant rode on through the opening. More light showed ahead where lanterns were burning on shelves of rock around an immense underground room.

"It is a world inside a world!" exclaimed Leonardo as the horses were halted and he swung out of his saddle. "I have heard of such places, but have never seen one such as this!"

"Maybe you have heard of this?" The giant had slipped out of his saddle and had turned to face him. "Eh, no, Leonardo, you fat one with the greasy-hog face?"

"No, señor, no!" Leonardo stepped back. He was smiling, but his voice betrayed alarm. "Never have I heard the slightest whisper of this place until Don Adolpho, himself, told me about it only a few nights ago. No one, I suppose, outside of a chosen few know of it. How could they, with the good Don Adolpho killing any man who knew his secrets?"

"I would not know," sneered the giant. "Unhorse the prisoners, Miguel, and shove them to their places." His hand grasped the whip that looked like a wiggling and curling snake. "If they balk, then I will take good care of them."

Marched down a passageway, they entered another room where four guards arose from a card game. The Kid and Pancho were ushered on across the room as one of the guards leaped ahead and opened another great door. Without a word the prisoners were pushed inside another dimly lighted room beyond. The door slammed and locked behind them.

It was like being thrust into a cold corner of hell, where lost souls cowered against the walls. At least twenty people, stared at the newcomers in the dim light. Men and women were here, two girls not over seventeen, and a boy who had not yet reached ten. Each of them had evidently seen or heard something that would make them dangerous to Don Adolpho Chávez, and here they were, whisked away from their homes to still their tongues from clattering to the outside world.

With their hands still bound behind them and the gags in their mouths, the Kid and Pancho could only stand and stare. But now, with the door locked and the guard gone away, a large woman was rising from a far corner. She started whimpering as she came forward, and as she reached brighter light the Kid saw that it was Anita Costello.

"So the tables have turned, have they?" she shrilled, halting a couple of yards away with her hands on her hips as she glared with all her fury at Pancho. "You, you cockroach, you monkey, you—you waddling duck! You, who would hide outside a window in the dark, and then come in and spill your knowledge to the Los Gatos sheriff! Why did you, grasshopper, have to tell all you saw and heard? The don came back within a few minutes after you were gone, and now I and my poor Manuel

are here. He believes we talked and told things—"

"Quiet yourself, Anita!" Manuel had come out of the corner. "What is done is done. But I swear we were loyal. I swear it!" He was whimpering to the Kid now. "Always we were honest, keeping our mouths shut. We have fed the yellow men—"

A tall man with a sandy beard was now coming forward angrily. "We've all heard the tale forty-'leven times since yuh birds hit here no more than an hour ago. Shut up! I've been here for weeks, so many I've lost the count of 'em. I'm Joe Day, a cowpuncher who saw a little more than was good for me." He stalked on around behind the Kid and Pancho. "Can't yuh see these dudes can't answer yuh back? Hold still, fellas, an' I'll get these gags outa yore mouths an' the rope off of yuh."

CHAPTER FIVE

Mutiny of the Damned

JOE DAY was still grumbling when he untied the last knot. "Yes, sir, I was lyin' in the brush one moonlit night on the bluffs above the break just below old Manuel's house. Some of Don Adolpho's Skull Head crowd come along pushin' a herd of cattle. Another bunch had come up on the other side of the Border with a herd of Mexican stolen cattle. It was pushed up across, an' then the Skull Head's herd was sent down an' across. I was just damn fool enough to report it to Sheriff King.... A few nights later I got a gun poked agin my back an' was brought here. They still think I know a lot more'n I do. . . ."

"How far are we here from Manuel's house on the rim?" The Kid asked.

"Only a few miles, I think," frowned Day. "Manuel said they wasn't long gettin' here. Of course there's several ways into this hole, according to others who've been snaked in. But yuh don't leave here, once yo're in. That would be like Adolpho puttin' a halter 'round his own skinny old neck!"

It was the start of the waiting and wondering. The door was finally opened. While two men beyond it stood guard with six-shooters, a third one shoved a huge pot of soup and a big pail of black beans inside. When the door was closed again the mob surged forward like half starved, snarling wolves. But Joe Day was the self-appointed boss here. He stood over the pot and pail with a chunk of rock in his hand and held them back while he watched an old woman carefully divide the food into the cracked pottery bowls.

"They feed us only once a day," he grinned when the job was done. "Sorter keepin' order here is one reason, maybe, that they ain't took me out an' shot me. The don believes in gettin' all he can out of a man."

With the prisoners fed, some of them piled down to sleep where they had been sitting, while others moved back into cell-like holes that honey-combed the walls.

Pancho for once was all dressed up and nowhere to go. He was lost without his guitar. The Kid had never seen him so glum. The two girls were certainly pretty enough to take his eye, and had he been elsewhere he would have tried to charm them, but now he just sat and scowled.

Day had made his little speech, had said all he had to say, and the others were no better. Some of them had been dragged in merely on suspicion, for Don Adolpho Chávez took no chances. The stakes in the game he and Don Doroteo, his son, were playing were as high as the moon, and the one who lost also lost his neck.

"I'm more afraid of Doroteo than Old Adolpho," growled Day. "That Doroteo's dynamite. When he comes into that big room out there my belly gets cold. That long-legged hombre would shoot a man just to try out the trigger-squeeze on a new gun. Wouldn't surprise me to learn that he's robbin' his daddy at ever' chance.

"Take them 'yellow men an' packages' this Pancho here mentions. I've already been hearin' Manuel an' his Anita whisper about that between 'em when they didn't think I was listenin'. Doroteo mighta stole the dope to sell to another customer, an' he mighta gun-herded the Chinese off somewhere to make them or their friends in this country cough up with another big price for gettin' 'em run across the Line."

Doroteo Chávez spoke for himself some hours after that. He was a handsome man, over six feet, waxed-mustached and gold-

toothed, and dressed like a lady-killer. A gold watch in Pancho's pocket that had been overlooked told them that midnight was getting close at hand. Then the door was flung open and the man stood there, holding a lantern lifted above his head. The four guards from the outer room stood behind him with six-shooters in their hands.

"I will talk to Pancho, the little one!" he snapped. "Let him come forward."

"That's him, Don Doroteo!" Leonardo appeared beside the man with his finger pointing when Pancho hesitated. "It was from him I took the good guitar and the fine six-shooter I gave you. Come, Pancho!"

Doroteo Chávez's lips parted in a thin smile when Pancho moved forward. "Well, hombre, tales from the Rurales crossed the Border three days ahead of you. You were spending a great amount of money below the Border. And I am told it was very good-looking money, the kind one might sensibly spend without getting caught. How much of that money have you left, hombre?"

"Who knows?" Pancho shrugged. "Perhaps one hundred and fifty, perhaps —well, maybe two—"

"One or two what? Hundreds—?"

"Of thousands," finished Pancho, quickly. "There was much more than that before I started spending."

"You see, Don Doroteo, you see!" cried Leonardo. "I did not lie to you!"

Chávez's eyes widened. For a second it looked as if Pancho had taken his breath away, then his face hardened. "Hombre, if you lie to me, I will pull the tongue out of your head with tongs. Where is all this money?"

"But it is my money!" exclaimed Pancho. "It is hidden in a very safe, dry place where no man but myself may find it. With my own hands I stole it, and when one steals a thing it belongs to him, if he does not get caught and thrown in the jail, no?"

Chávez took two steps forward, head lowering, eyes sparkling. "Keep back the rest of you! I will have this ape's tongue unless he talks quickly."

"Careful, Don Doroteo!" warned Leonardo. "He is one to kick a man, or to bite him!"

Chávez was like a bull who saw nothing and heard nothing but the cringing man in front of him. He came on, with Pancho slowly retreating.

In the doorway Leonardo stepped to one side, face grimacing with alarm. He hissed something to the four guards. They moved past him, their eyes shifty, watching everything—good dogs keeping to the heels of their master and going to protect him at all costs.

"Come here, little one!" Doroteo Chávez urged, his voice dangerously soft. His hands were opening and closing. Pancho retreated another pace, then fell upon his knees.

"Mercy, amigo!" he cried. "I am but a little man—"

"Don't 'amigo' me!" snarled the don. "I am no friend of your kind, you lizard!"

"Sí, my chocolate drinker, that is true!" The voice came from Leonardo André, and there was cool death in every word of it as he stood there with two big six-shooters filling his hands. "Put up your hands before I blow the backbone through you to let your belly fall out!"

The don's hands jerked upward. "What is this, a quick game of the double-cross!"

"Surely it is a game you or your thieving father would know best," intoned Leonardo. "Steady, all of you! Would you see the don die before your eyes because of a foolish move! Take his guns, Señor Kid. Up and into it, also, Pancho!"

★

THE Kid started for Chávez, but Pancho was quicker. He was up and forward, a wicked little grin streaking across his face. He snatched the fine weapons from Chávez's holsters, then sprang back, helping Leonardo to keep the four amazed guards covered. In a few seconds, with Joe Day springing into it, those speechless bullies were shorn of their weapons. Chávez stood there pop-eyed, his wide mouth working without the slightest sign of a voice.

And now the guard on the outer door, sénor!" hissed Leonardo. "I played the game of the black dog and the traitor only to find this place. Now the play is over. Let Pancho and the tall one guard these. If they make a move or lift their voices

above a whisper you will shoot them down, Pancho. We will be back in no time at all."

A wicked smile lighted his face, the eyes now lion-like in their glowing. "The Indian in my blood has spoken and now, Señor Kid," he added gently, "let us go. But first, Pancho, here is your guitar."

The Kid followed, moving rapidly along on tiptoe while the fat Leonardo picked up a lantern and walked heavily, his long-shanked spurs dragging. Just before he reached the door he started whistling a low tune. At the door he sat the lantern on a rock and lifted a big fist, rapping out a short signal.

It looked as if it was going to be that simple, without even an argument, when big hands on the other side of the door moved a lever that lifted three strong steel bars out of their latches. But it was something else when the door swung open and a sullen, six-foot brute of a man glowered at Leonardo without seeing the Kid just behind him.

"Go back and bring one of the older ones here with you!" he snarled, right hand dropped to the butt of a Colt. "You should have sense enough to know the rules. New ones here — ".

"The only rules I know in a game like this, hombre," cut in the big Leonardo, "is the kind we play with blood."

A knife had come into his hand from somewhere. The guard snarled and tried to surge back. Before he could snatch his six-shooter from his holster, Leonardo's left hand made a furious slap that caught him on the nose, and the knife had slashed forward. There was a rip and the guard buckled, coming forward as Leonardo stepped out of the way to let him fall flat.

"It is just as well that he died." A grin sneaked across Leonardo's face. "*Carramba,* let us get his belts and weapons and drag him away quickly! He bleeds like the butchered hog!"

They took the weapons, then picked up the victim and slung him into a black crevice in the rocks. Within a few minutes a burly fellow from among the amazed prisoners stood at the door. He was armed with the dead man's weapons and his big hat made him look as much as possible like the original guard.

To Joe Day had fallen the lot of untying the prisoners. He had saved every piece of rope and cord, and the moment the Kid's and Leonardo's backs were turned, he had gone to work on the four guards and the tall and arrogant Chávez.

"They're tied up tighter'n hell's hatband," he grinned. "I'm just gettin' ready to put gags on 'em."

"Other quick work must be done here," grinned Leonardo. "We must get these people somewhere—"

"Then why not run them to what they call upstairs?" cut in Day. "I've heard 'em talk about it. It's a door an' a passageway that leads to the top of the world here. They say yuh can's get down from up there, but yuh can see all over the country. Maybe they'll have sense enough to keep outa sight up there in the light."

"Who will show you the way?" sneered one of the guards. "I will not, and neither will any of the rest!"

"You will show us, hombre." Leonardo stepped behind him, long knife again in his hand.

He placed the sharp point against the man's spine. The guard stiffened, face twisting with a sudden little spasm of pain.

"Move," ordered Leonardo, gently. "There is but one-tenth of the point in your skin, yet you quiver like jelly. Do as we ask, before I cut you in half!"

Don Doroteo started to curse, and it was Joe Day's chance. Without a word he knocked the don heels over head on the floor with one furious blow to that arrogant mouth.

The guard was already whimpering and leading the way. The prisoners were following. Several of those who could be trusted to fight when the time came had been armed and were bristling for a chance.

The Kid ordered Pancho to remain with him, and he stopped Chávez and the three remaining guards from leaving the room. More of Joe Day's rope was soon put to good use, and the four men were tied back to back. Then the Kid put out all the lights except for a lantern he placed back in a hole.

"But they are not all gagged, señor?" whispered Pancho as they left the room.

"Surely they will start to yell when others come, no?"

"Maybe we'll want them to do just that!" nodded the Kid. "There's a lot to do yet, Pancho, and we haven't won the pot, by a long shot."

The cringing guard had led the people from the room down a series of winding passageways to a stout, hidden doorway. Soon they were gone, up somewhere into the light under an open sky that many of them had not seen for weeks. They were left up there with Day to keep them in line, and Leonardo returned with a little gang of armed men behind him.

They were none too quick about it, for the guard on the outer door had already hissed a warning. Riders were coming, and the armed little mob waiting for them was going into hiding.

With the guard on the door knowing just what to do, seven men were soon riding into the room. In the dim light loomed Lark Walker with a gag in his mouth and his hands roped behind him.

"Yuh *would* talk to that damned cavalry captain!" growled a big blackbeard as he piled out of his saddle. "Yo've done some smugglin', an' yuh know yuh have—"

"Señor Snead!" Doroteo Chávez shrieked. "There is trouble here!"

"What's that?"

"Reach for it!" roared the Kid. "Reach! Everybody's covered!"

Only two men who had quickly slid out of their saddles made foolish moves while the others jerked their hands above their shoulders. Pancho and Leonardo fired at almost the same time, and the two wheeled and plunged to the floor.

A few moments later with a new pile of weapons beginning to grow behind him, the Kid ordered: "Take these stiffs with you, in there — and the next man who lets out a yell gets shot!"

It was like driving sheep into a pen. Lark Walker was herded on in with the rest of them. Then, as the Kid slammed the door, a frightened hiss filled his ears.

He wheeled, and saw that the guard on the outer door had lost his nerve and slipped back inside.

"More are coming!" he cried in Spanish. "Surely I heard Samson the Bull laugh in the distance, and when that monster laughs my blood goes to water!"

CHAPTER SIX

The Kid Collects

"THE puma fears no darkness!" Don Adolpho Chávez, himself, shrieked the answer to the challenge in an irritated tone. Six of his best men were immediately behind him. Behind those men rode four prisoners, each of them blindfolded as well as gagged, their hands behind them. They were men who could not be trusted to remain in the outside world with infernal cavalrymen overrunning everything.

Behind the prisoners the powerful Samson the Bull was bringing up the rear with a fifth prisoner in his big arms, and that fifth prisoner was a girl of twenty, the devil of the lot.

Soldiers had come here before, sneaking government agents and hired spies. They raised the devil for a time, and then it cooled again. Now Don Adolpho knew what had become of the yellow men and the packages in the cave near the Costello house. Government agents had found them and slipped them away quietly to hold them as evidence, but what would they ever find?

Contraband drugs were silent, and the yellow men would be afraid to talk. They could identify no one beyond Manuel Costello and his wife—and perhaps the

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dead body of the foolish Pedro, the youth Samson the Bull had tossed off the cliff.

In a few days all this would pass. Any number of men were being arrested and thrown in jail, but where was the evidence? They might try a few, as usual, but they'd have to free them, and the rest would be freed without so much as a trial. And Dave King — always with his hand out for a piece of graft — would not be there to try his usual double-cross on any one. Neither would his Troop Calver be there.. For the sheriff and his deputy were in the line of prisoners behind the don right now, and the sheriff's pretty light-haired daughter was brought along to make Dave King listen to reason.

Don Adolpho scarcely glanced at the guard who opened the door for him. Even as he passed the lantern his snuff-box came out. He held it close to his nose and rode on, the line of horses and men following.

It never once occured to Don Adolpho that there could possibly be anything wrong. He heard the girl scream behind him, and realized that she had at last managed to chew the gag out of her mouth, or Samson the Bull had taken it out just to let her scream, now that the sound of her voice could bring danger to no one here.

Don Adolpho felt no prick of alarm when he heard the heavy door slam shut. He pulled up, looking around, wondering why the four guards playing cards at the table did not immediately arise to show their usual respect for him. Then he heard a rumbling coming through the closed door to the prison itself. An instant later men were gasping with alarm.

"What the hell!" snarled a big Americano. "Dammit, look at the guns! We — we're covered, Don Adolpho!"

"Si, señor," intoned the voice of Leonardo André. "Die in your saddles, or reach for the air!"

None of them knew right at the moment that a desperate battle was going on just beyond the outer door.

AN OLD hat slopped low on a man's head and a ragged blanket plucked around his shoulders did not fool the keen eyes of Samson the Bull. Being a few yards behind the others, he had suddenly seen the danger. He jerked the gag from the girl's mouth, and with no warning at all, hurled her forward, straight into the face of the tall man at the door. At the same time, he flipped himself out of his saddle, his long knife's jeweled hilt filling his hand.

It was almost the undoing of the Red Cliff Kid. He had to catch the girl in his arms, and before he could slip her to one side, the giant was looming almost right atop him with the long blade slashing for his throat.

Samson the Bull evidently feared no man's six-shooter. As the Kid ducked the first knife-stroke, a blast of mocking laughter tore from Samson. The Kid swept on, the helpless girl now staring in wide-eyed terror and trying to kick herself out of the way.

The Kid got in one solid blow of the six-shooter to the big man's face. The giant laughed as he rocked back, the blood coming down. He swung again, and now the Kid dropped to one knee, the roaring flames from his Colt tearing into the giant.

It was then that Samson the Bull did the spectacular thing. With a roar of laughter he hurled his knife to one side, bucked himself forward and seized the Kid in his arms, hugging him to him, intent on crushing his victim.

"Now!" he roared. "Now you die!"

It was at that moment that Pancho arrived. Like a lizzard the little Mexican came popping out the door and fell upon the giant's back. A big six-shooter swung up, then down, a flash in the lanternlight. Samson the Bull grunted, all the strength suddenly flooding out of him.

"You did not heet heem in the right place!" cried Pancho, striking again. "The skull of heem is like the shell of the egg, hoh, no?"

* * *

A funeral hush fell when the Kid freed the girl's arms and followed Pancho back through the doorway. Having no chance to even start a fight with six-shooters staring at them from all directions, Don Adolpho's crowd had been taken almost like hares in a trap and ushered into the prison.

Don Adolpho alone had been left in

the room to face Leonardo at the big table in the center of the floor. Don Adolpho sat there as stiff as a ramrod on a bench, his talon-like fingers on the gold-headed cane, the silver snuff-box poised daintily.

Under the upturned brim of his big hat Leonardo was staring straight into his face, his eyes sparkling.

"And so that is the way of it," he was saying in his best Spanish while armed men who had been prisoners a short time before were watching. "For many weeks I have worked here. Certain ones on the other side of the border offered to make me a captain of the Rurales. But I wanted none of that. I wanted only your blood upon my hands. As to your son, I will see him hanged. You have killed enough people.

"From the top of this roof I will be able to send out my call for help. The soldiers will come, for I have friends out there, who will be watching the hills for a certain signal. It is the end of you, Don Adolpho, and for your friends."

"You are a smart one, Leonardo," intoned the don, still toying with his snuff-box. "But the law has been at my heels for many years. I have money and power. I will live to cut your throat, and see all your compadres go to the devil. Money and power will buy anything in this country where the politicians sell their honor and souls for a dollar."

"All that is perhaps true," intoned Leonardo, leaning gently forward with his big hands on his lap. "Gold will buy much for a man, but it will not return his blood, once it spouts out. Allow me, Don Adolpho Chávez, to punctuate my point."

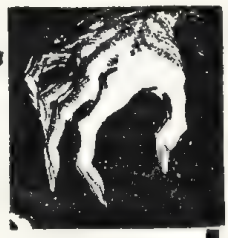
The room shook, dust and bits of rock dropping here and there from the sudden concussion, a cloud of smoke lifting in slow billows from under the massive table and curling upward like a black mushroom.

No one was behind Don Adolpho. He had stiffened, old mouth puckering and sagging, eyes widened. Shot straight through the lean belly, he looked like a man with all his blood drained out of him. By a tremendous effort he raised the snuff-box, looked at it quizzically, and then let it roll across the table.

Leonardo lifted his left hand, pulled the box to him, face clouding with a frown.

"Look at it, Señor Kid!" There was amazement in his voice now. *"Madre de Dios,* he was but an actor and a faker! The box holds no snuff at all. It is only a mirror inside into which he was always looking at his face. *Por Dios,* the vanity of some men goes beyond measure!"

THE END



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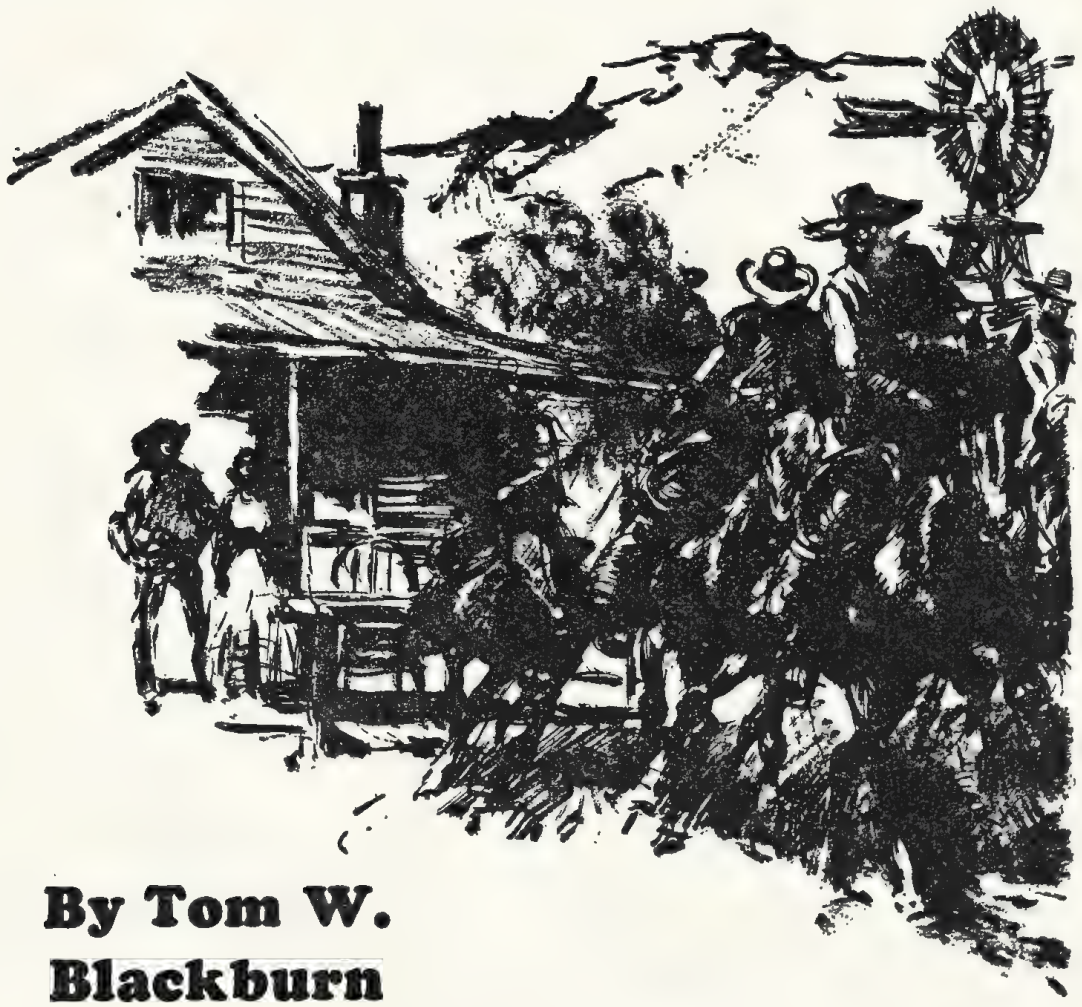


By Tom W. Blackburn

WELCOME TO MURDER RANCH!

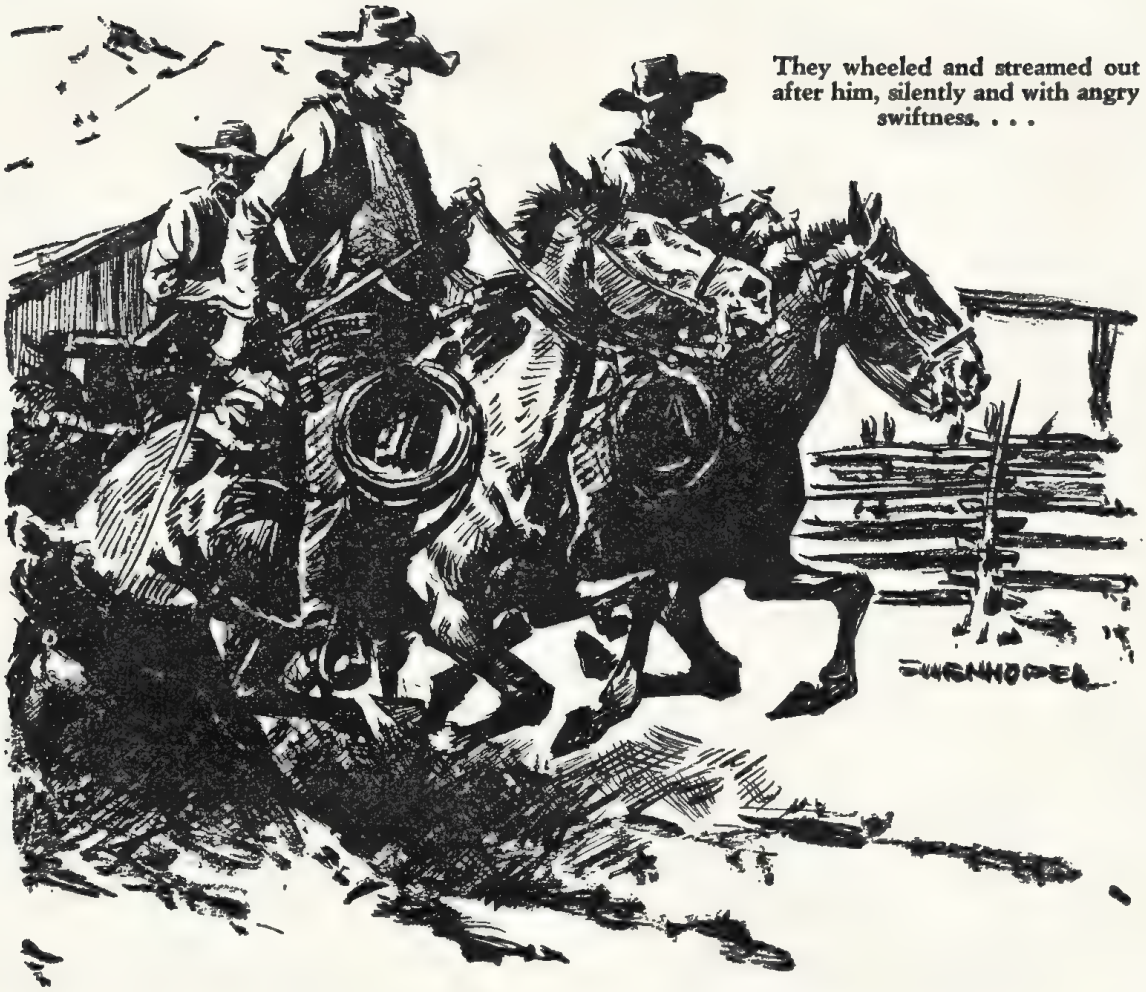
The new owners of the Rowel gave Thane Kilgore, veteran ramrod, his choice of dying or of drawing his time and riding out. . . . Thane chose to live, but knew —whether or not he was on that pay-roll—that his heart and his fighting guts belonged forever to just one outfit in all the world!

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Dead Man's Ranch

THANE KILGORE ran his eyes over the lighted office of the Rowel outfit with the feeling of seeing the end of a job well done. There was a litter of carefully sorted papers on the desk under the lamp. A stand in the corner held half a dozen laboriously balanced ledgers. These were the results of ten weeks of steady, wearying effort.

The late Gus Mandell had been a good rancher. The inheritance he left was proof of that—proof contained in these pain-



They wheeled and streamed out after him, silently and with angry swiftness. . . .

Gripping Range-War Novel

stakingly checked records—this untangling of the last two or three years of Rowel operations. But old Gus had scorned books and bookkeeping. Thane had neither wanted nor enjoyed this job his dying boss had given him.

"I kind of hate to ask this, son," old Gus had said the night he checked out. "If Jack Anson at the Wheel still had some fight left in him and it would take gunsmoke to hold the Rowel when I'm gone, you'd want to stay. I know that. But Anson's a whipped puppy. He won't forget the trimming we handed him five years ago as long as he lives. We don't need guns, now. What Rowel needs is a gent who knows all my business and can get it down on paper so a stranger can see what Rowel amounts to. I'm giving the spread to my brother's two kids. I've never seen 'em and I wouldn't ask you to work for 'em, sight unseen. Make up some books so they can see what they've got afore you go. That's all I ask—"

There was a bond between old Mandell and his foreman, so Thane had given his promise. He had regretted it many times, sweating with a pencil at a distasteful job while his saddle string fattened in the home meadow. But at last it was over with, and all was in order. Gus Mandell's heirs would arrive tonight. And Thane Kilgore had the Rowel ready for them.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. The night train would have stopped at Powder Valley at six. It was now eight. Faraday, from the livery, would be driving the newcomers out from town, and they'd be rolling in, any minute.

Thane reached his hat down from the peg, wanting a breath of the night and a little chance to think before Faraday's buggy arrived. Now, almost as an echo to his thoughts, steps rattled on the ver-

anda. Thane reached for the door, but it came open before his fingers touched the latch.

He had expected strange faces or Faraday's grin in the opening. Bill Prebble stood there, instead. Prebble was the youngest of the Rowel riders, a cool and deliberate sort of youngster. But he was wild, now. His face was ashen and he caught Thane's arm, his fingers biting deep.

"Thane! You seen Bud Tally since chow?"

Thane shook his head. Prebble dropped his hand. "Blast 'em! They've got him, too!" he choked.

Before Thane could stop him, he turned and plunged out onto the verandah again. Thane ran loosely after him, sharp and uneasy puzzlement stabbing him. Lanterns carried from the bunkhouse were winking back of the harness shed at the lower end of the yard. Prebble was loping toward them. Thane let his stride out, plowing up to the shed a scant yard behind the boy.

The rest of the crew was gathered in the lantern light. In the center of the glow a man lay in the dust on his face. The back of his head had been shattered by the mark of a clubbed pistol barrel. The hair about the wound was gray and thin. Pop Wattle, smith, camp-cook and range dean of the crew, a man who had no enemies and whose loyalty to Rowel had kept him in the same bunk for fifteen years!

Frank Bushman and Neil Ormand squeezed up against Prebble.

"Bud's gone, too!" the boy croaked. "Scatter. We'll find him dumped some place!"

Lanterns danced away, and Thane stared at the dead man. Tracks were pretty well scuffed, but the story was there: A man had hunched in the shadows of the harness shed on the path from the kitchen to the bunkhouse. Thane remembered that Pop had gotten into an argument with Tsang Lo and had stayed in the kitchen after the rest had finished eating. He'd come alone down toward his bunk and the waiting man had tagged him with a bullet. A savage anger began to burn slowly through Thane. He knew this sign.

Anson! Anson, and his Wheel outfit!

Old Gus had been wrong, then, when he had said Jack Anson was a whipped puppy. Anson had been whipped enough to leave Rowel alone so long as old Gus lived. But he still wanted Rowel range.

That part wasn't hard to understand, for the two ranches split a rich valley between them. Thrown together, they would make an empire. And Anson had always wanted them.

Thane saw that this was carefully planned. Anson knew Mandel's heirs were due tonight. And he had left them a dead man for a welcome—the first stroke in a ring of terror he would likely try to weave about them. It was good generalship. Strangers on the Rowel, they'd have no roots down. And they might spook badly enough to sell what had been given them to Anson's agent—at Anson's price.

It was a threadbare pattern of action, but one which had worked a thousand times. Thane's anger flamed through him, and with it went a strong coursing of anticipation. After weeks at the desk in the office, he was going to have his chance at a kind of business he understood better than any other. What Anson and the Wheel asked for, they'd get!

Then he checked himself. After tonight he'd be working for new owners. And maybe they wouldn't give him the free hand old Gus had always let him have when Rowel was at stake. Maybe they'd spook easy. Maybe they wouldn't want to fight. Maybe Rowel wouldn't mean anything to them but a chunk of ground which could be turned to cash. Until he'd found that out, he'd have to walk easy.

He straightened above Pop Wattle's body as a shout went up below the corrals. In a moment Bushman and Ormand and Prebble were back with the lanterns, supporting Bud Tally among them.

Thane squatted down in front of the man as his companions lowered him to a seat on a chopping block. "All right, Bud?" he barked.

Tally nodded. "I'll do to get another crack at 'em, if that's what you mean, Thane!" he grunted. "The dirty sons! They got Pop, didn't they?"

Thane twisted out of the way so that the rider could see the old man's body in the dust. Tally's face was a battered

mask, so mercilessly pounded that his features seemed run together. A bitter hatred flamed in his eyes.

"I started back up to the kitchen to find Pop. I need a buck to buy into the blackjack game at the bunks, and I knew he'd let me have it. I saw that jigger at the harness shed jump him. I started on a run, but two more came out from by the corral and grabbed me. They got a choke on my throat and dragged me around back. I never even got in one good punch!

"They kicked the living daylights out of me. When they'd had enough of that, one of them tells me every gent that stays on Rowel will get the same feed dealt Pop and me, and advises me to pass the word along. Then his buddy lands a chunk of iron back of my ear and I come to, finding Bill and Neil holding me up!"

"See who they were?"

"Didn't have to see. Couldn't have, anyways. After the first wallop there was so much blood in my eyes I was blind as a bat. But I know who they were, just the same's you, Thane! Wolf stays wolf and Wheel stays Wheel!"

Thane nodded. Bill Prebble shoved forward. "We'll plant 'em, this time, six feet under. And we'll burn their damned spread to the ground!" Thane scowled. "Not tonight, Bill. Tomorrow, maybe. We'll palaver it then."

"Tomorrow!" Prebble's breath exploded the word.

"Tomorrow. You're forgetting we've got new owners coming in tonight. We've got to know how they'll take this and how things will line out, afore we know what we're to do."

Prebble spat. "Them kids'll have old Gus Mandell's blood in 'em, won't they? And Rowel's their iron, ain't it? Put it square up to them and they'll fight!"

Thane shook his head again. "Tomorrow, Bill!" he cautioned again. Then he turned to Neil Ormand and Bushman. "Get Bud back to his bunk and patch him up. Wrap Pop's body up in some blankets. When Tom Faraday gets here I'll send him down with his buggy. He can take Pop back to town and get word to the sheriff for us. And keep your jaws tight about this for tonight."

The two riders nodded. Thane turned to repeat his warning to Prebble, but the boy had vanished. Thane scowled and turned back up toward the big house. He stopped at the pump for a drink, then circled back of the kitchen, his eyes watching for any careless sign the raiders might have left. But he knew that as well as Prebble or Bushman or Ormand or even Bud Tally. Any tracks he did find would lead down valley to the Wheel.

He wanted to figure out how to handle telling Mandell's nephew and niece about the bloody welcome Wheel had planted for them on their inheritance, without playing into Jack Anson's game of terror. He was still out back of the big house when somebody hailed him from the front.

He circled and found Tom Faraday's buggy drawn up in the yard. Silhouetted back of the verandah rail amid heaped luggage, were two figures. And he moved reluctantly forward to meet his new bosses.

WHEN Thane reached the door, the newcomers were already in the office, ushered there by Bill Prebble. And Prebble was just finishing a hasty and half garbled account of Pop Wattle's death and the attack on Bud Tally.

The shock of his story was plain on the faces of the brother and sister at the desk and on the face of old Tom Faraday. All of them tried to shake it off as Thane swung into the room.

"Get out, Bill!" Thane snapped at Prebble. The rider colored with belated guilt, seeming to only then realize that in his haste for authority to ride in reprisal, he had been loose-jawed. He backed out the door, and Tom Faraday pushed forward.

"Here's your freight, Kilgore," he said, and nodded at the two strangers.

He meant it to be jocular. But Prebble's account had swept him clean of humor and it fell flat. Thane grunted.

"We've got some outbound freight, too, Tom. The boys are waiting for you down by the corral. Tell Art Horner I'll be in early tomorrow."

"I'll tell him," Faraday agreed. "But he won't wait. Art takes his star serious."

"Then let him come out here!" Thane snapped. "I can't get away any sooner!"

Faraday nodded and followed Prebble into the darkness outside. Thane pushed the door closed behind them and turned to the two left in the room. He had gathered a quick impression of the niece as he came in the door, and he rounded it swiftly out, now.

She was small and trim and had the same sorrel hair, red lighted and glinting, which had belonged to old Gus. She had the same quick, wide spaced eyes. And the impression of latent strength which had made Gus Mandell a man to ride with, was apparent in her also. Relief slid through Thane. He saw fight in Sue Mandell and he was grateful.

The gratitude thinned when he swung his eyes toward her brother. The hardness of maturity was a well developed barrier in Hal Mandell's eyes and manner. There was a thinness to his features which robbed them of his uncle's craggy strength. The only thing the nephew seemed to share with old Gus was size. He was a big man and he wore a belted gun with cool assurance. Thane put out his hand to both of them.

"I'm Thane Kilgore," he said quietly. He nodded at the littered desk. "We've a lot to go over. And since the trouble tonight, we'll have a lot more. But it's late, and tomorrow will be soon enough. I've had Maria Lopez here for a week. She's put the house in shape as best she could. She has your rooms ready. If you want to go on up, I'll send up your bags. And for tonight. . . . Well, welcome to the Rowel!"

A wry, twisted smile pulled across Hal Mandell's lips, but he said nothing. Sue put out her hand again. The pallor of worry which had swept her features with Prebble's story was still deep. But her friendly eagerness burned momentarily through these things.

"Thank you, Mister Kilgore," she said. "Don't bother about Maria. I'll find her." She pulled open the door leading to the main part of the big house.

Her brother stepped suddenly in front of her. "Just a minute, Sue!" he growled. "What is this, Kilgore, a squeeze play? Are you all trying to throw a scare into us?"

"The dead man?" Thane asked levelly. "Go down to the corral and look for yourself, Mandell. I'm sorry your sister had to hear it so suddenly. I aimed to break it to you a little more quietly. But Prebble shot his mouth off before I could get to him!"

"I don't like it!"

Thane grinned tightly. "Neither does Rowel, Mandell!"

Mandell grunted. "A man killed the night we get here. . . . You've got guards out, then?"

Thane's brows raised in mild surprise. There was a sharp curiosity in the question for which he could see no reason. He let his smile widen. "After the man's dead? No, I haven't. In this country even two-legged lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place on the same night!"

"You're sure, Kilgore?"

The question came softly from Hal Mandell. He matched Thane's smile with one of his own, then stepped out of his sister's way and followed her on into the main part of the house.

Thane went out onto the verandah. Tom Faraday's buggy was just wheeling past, Pop Wattle's body a blanketed bundle on the floor of the back seat. Bill Prebble swung off of the step of the buggy, leaping agilely over the wheel to the ground. Pop had been Bill's especial partner.

Thane waited silently until Faraday had rattled on across the bridge and was gone from the yard. Then he called to Bill and asked him to take the Mandell's luggage up onto the second floor of the house.

This done, he slipped on out into the yard and made a second circuit of the buildings. It was again not so much of a precaution as to give himself time to think—not about the Wheel, now, but about Hal Mandell.

The boys at the bunkhouse had turned in. The building was dark, but the low, angry mutter of their voices sounded through the open windows. While he stood there, Prebble came back down from the main house and turned in. Thane heard him kick his boots off and answer some query.

Thane drifted again, recrossing the compound. Lights glowed dully behind the curtains across the windows of the two front bedrooms in the upper story of the big house. The new owners, settling themselves. Beyond the yard, the night

was silent and the hills loomed in shadow. A pole at the corral creaked as a horse shifted against it. Thane turned back to the office and rolled into his bunk on the couch.

★

KILGORE had been sleeping soundly for some time when the rifle shot dragged him upright and he headed for the outer door without his boots and with his head not yet clear. Before he reached the latch of the verandah door, a scream sounded above him on the second floor of the house.

He veered back and tore open the door into the big living room. As he did this, and while echoes of the shot were still rolling, the scream came again. Unmistakably Sue Mandell's voice.

He ran swiftly through the darkened living room, dodging familiar obstacles, and hit the stairs three steps at a time. All the doors in the upper hall were closed. He hadn't asked which of the rooms Maria had fixed for the girl and which for her brother. He seized the handle of the first and swung it wide.

He had a glimpse of a tumbled bed—empty—and the blanket-huddled, crouching figure of the girl against the wall.

Then his eyes fastened on the half open window. In the lower pane, almost dead center, was the sinister star mark which a bullet drills through glass.

His eyes gauged the course of the bullet. It had passed inches above the bed and had gouged a raw, splintered furrow across the top of the bureau. If Sue Mandell had been in bed when the shot was fired, and she must have been, death had been very close to her.

Maria Lopez piled into the room, moaning with terror and with her wrapper flying loosely about her huge figure. She saw the girl, and wrapped quick, comforting arms around her. Sue Mandell straightened, her eyes on Thane.

"See anything, Miss Mandell?"

"I was just lying there—just going to sleep. The window jumped and the sound of a gun came in from outside. Glass sprayed on me. Guess I was thinking about the poor man who had been killed. I—I went to pieces. I'm sorry."

Thane nodded and crossed to the window, stooping to look out under its half drawn blind. Thirty yards away, the peak of the harness shed was nearly on a level with the sill of the window. He thought about it, then dropped his eyes to the men streaming half clad out of the bunkhouse. He silently ticked off their names as they appeared. They were all there. He turned back into the room. And as he turned, Hal Mandell plunged through the door.

"What's up now?" he demanded roughly.

Thane looked narrowly at him. Mandell had apparently only started to undress. His coat was gone, and his shirt and boots. The thought struck Thane that it had taken Sue's brother a long time to come from the next room. And he saw something else. One thigh of the man's trousers was fuzzy with a dry, dusty kind of powder. It might mean nothing. But weathered old cedar shakes—like those on the roof of the harness shed—could smudge cloth like that.

"I want a look at your room, Mandell," Thane said.

The man stabbed a sharp look at him, but shrugged, stepping back out into the hall. They went into the second room together. Mandell's bed was turned back, but he had not been in it. A suitcase was open at its foot. One side was packed with clothes. The other held more clothing—and a Winchester, broken down, packed on top. Thane saw a box of shells, its lid off, in one corner of the case. He lifted the barrel section of the rifle and tilted the muzzle to his nose. The strong, unmistakable odor of powder clung to it. He dropped the barrel back into the case and turned to Mandell.

"How fast can you run?"

The man scowled. Thane's glance narrowed coldy. "Fast enough," he said evenly, "to do ninety yards and a flight of stairs in a minute and a half?"

CHAPTER TWO

Lawman's Caution

MANDELL frowned, then, with a strong effort, he shrugged. Sue appeared in the doorway. Her brother turned to her.

"Better get back to your room, Sis. And keep the lights out. Regardless of what Kilgore says, somebody's trying to kill us. I wouldn't be surprised if the man who killed that rider before we got here was after you or me!"

The girl's pallor deepened. She stepped back into the hall and closed the door after her. Mandell caught Thane's arm.

"Come on out in the yard, mister," he said coldly. "I want to talk to you!"

Thane grunted agreement and followed the other downstairs to the office, where the lamp had been relighted. Curious, Thane pulled away from Hal Mandell and stepped into the room.

Dusty and damp with the sweat of a fast ride, Sheriff Art Horner sat on a corner of the desk, talking swiftly with Bill Prebble. He broke off when Thane came in and nodded sharply at Bill. The rider stepped out into the night and closed the outer door after him.

The sheriff leaned toward Thane. "Kilgore, I think you've got some talking to do. Start it!"

There was no friendliness in Horner's voice, and Thane felt the lack, but he held himself in. "Talking, Art?"

"Talking!" the sheriff repeated solidly. "You ship a dead man in to me by Tom Faraday. Then, when I'm coming into your yard, I hear somebody burning .30-30 powder and somebody else screaming their head off at three in the morning. What's going on?"

Thane angled a glance at the door into the living room. He wondered if Hal Mandell had stopped there when he turned into the office. The door was closed. He shrugged and turned back to the sheriff.

"Art," he asked slowly, "do you know where Jack Anson and his crew were at supper time tonight?"

"No."

"I'll bet they were a sight closer to our kitchen than their own when feeding time came!"

Horner scrubbed at the line of his jaw. "So that's it? We're going to call this another round in the old tangle Gus Mandell and Anson had, eh? Thane, I'm going to warn you. Don't make any guesses you can't back up. You think Pop Wattle's death was a Wheel play. It could be; Anson's no primrose. But how about this shot?"

"It came from the roof of the harness shed and right across Miss Sue's bed. It was a scare shot, plain, dead center in the window. Who ever put it there could have hit her if he'd wanted to."

And because he wasn't quite sure of something else, Thane lied a little, keeping Hal Mandell out of it. "Must have been the Wheel again, tightening the squeeze. What you aim to do, Art?"

The sheriff's eyes tightened. "At the Wheel?" he asked. "Nothing, yet. And here's why. Here's why I was warning you: I'm not saying Anson couldn't have tagged Pop Wattle and drubbed Tally. He could, and I know it. But neither him nor any of his riders fired that shot from the roof of your harness shed. I bumped into the whole Wheel crew, Anson included, out about six miles. I wasn't loafing on the way, and none of them could have got here before I did. There's more to it, too, Kilgore. Somebody wants Rowel. That's plain. Somebody's trying to scare these two kids off it.

"But Anson and the Wheel doesn't cover all the odds. You never seen Gus Mandell's will, did you? No. Maybe you don't know all that was in it. Maybe you do. I don't know. But one thing Gus provided was that if his nephew and his niece wouldn't stick to the ranch—if they gave up the ghost and tried to sell out within five years—Rowel was to go to you, and you were to pay them off out of its income!"

Thane's head jerked up. He didn't doubt what Horner was telling him. Old Gus had thought a great deal of him; he'd always known that. And Gus had known Rowel would be safe in his hands. The provision sounded like Gus. But what hit him and hit him hard was that Gus had unknowingly put him in a hell of a spot.

He understood Horner's unfriendliness, now. The way things lay, he could be back of the whole trouble which had hit the ranch tonight.

"This spread is worth a little powder to any gent," the sheriff went on steadily. "Maybe it's Anson back of this. Maybe it ain't. I've got to sit tight till I know. And I've got to watch all angles, Kilgore. Including you!"

Art Horner was a good officer. A slow and steady man, his mind moved mechanically, and nothing could shake it from its charted course toward justice. Horner suspected Anson, but he also suspected Thane Kilgore. Until the thing was cleared, both men would carry the sheriff's watchfulness in equal portions.

Thane leaned forward. "All right, Art," he said slowly. "I know where my tracks lie. But look here, this thing has got to stop before it gets started. The boys on this place helped Gus Mandell build the ranch. They fought for him when he needed fighters. Gus is gone, but they'll still fight for Rowel. If anything else breaks, they'll ride to war, and all hell couldn't stop them! That means blood!"

"You think about that, Kilgore!" Horner answered. "I'll see that Wheel and Anson think about it, too. Sure, I could arrest Anson. I could arrest you, right tonight. If I got the right man, the whole thing'd be stopped, but only so long as I kept him in jail. That wouldn't be very long. I've got no more to hold Anson on than I have you. If I got the wrong man, I'd be helping the son that's scheming the whole thing. So I've got to wait and I've got to watch, and I'm warning you both equally! Thane, be careful!"

Thane watched the sheriff step into the night and heard him presently mount and ride away. Restlessness and helpless anger surged through him. He had stuck to do the bookwork of the transfer of Rowel ownership out of friendship for the old man who had built the ranch. He was willing now to stick it out and fight for Rowel. But the gratitude of the dead man, as expressed in a provision of his will, and the plodding carefulness of a thorough officer of the law had tangled him in a net of dangerously uncomfortable circumstances at the very time when he should have been free to fight!

Thane tightened his lips, hooked on his gun-belt, and stepped out into a night already graying with false dawn.

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HAL MANDELL was leaning against one of the verandah pillars, as Thane came out of the office and stopped beside him. Mandell ran his eyes over Thane with a slow insolence.

"Kilgore, I think you've about lived up your usefulness on this ranch. You'd better be moving on. Today, say."

"You trying to scare me like you did your sister?" Thane asked quietly.

Mandell grinned. "The shot through her window?" he asked. "I was afraid you'd tumble to that. You're a little too sharp, Kilgore. That's why you'd better paddle along. And I reckon you'd better take the rest of my uncle's crew along with you."

"—so you can force your sister out. So you can keep Rowel for yourself?"

Mandell nodded, scrubbing at the planking with the toe of his boot. "It's not as bad as it sounds, Kilgore. I've got a little money. Not half what the ranch is worth, but enough to square Sue up a bit for her share. You don't know my sister. She likes to run things. What business has a woman got with half a ranch?

"She don't need it. She's pretty. She'll marry one of these days. And when she's married, she won't give a tinker's damn for the Rowel. Till then, she'll want her nose in everything and she'll be in everybody's way—mostly mine. A woman can't run a ranch, but she can keep a man from running it right. Sue's stubborn. The only way's to scare her a little and take the fight out of her. That's why I broke her window from that shed."

Thane studied the man carefully. He saw selfishness deeply grained into his nature. But he saw, also, a sort of unwilling affection for the sister Hal Mandell wanted to buy out of her half of their inheritance. It was the kind of affection Thane had often seen in brothers—half condemning and tolerant, but sincere enough, for all of that. It made it harder to fit Mandell into the picture.

Thane was puzzled. And because he was, he made the obvious answer. "How's your sister going to take this when she hears about it?"

Mandell's half smile didn't change. "She won't hear about it, Kilgore. It's just between you and me—and we won't tell her. Neither one of us!"

For the first time Thane saw that one of the man's hands, which had been hanging behind the pillar, held a leveled gun.

He saw, also that the hammer was eared back and the barrel steady. He knew Mandell would try to kill him if he gave the wrong answer.

If Mandell dropped him, Art Horner, already suspicious, would listen to and believe a story trumped up to make it appear the Rowel foreman had been caught in another stroke of deviltry against the ranch and its new owners.

"You listened outside the door when the sheriff was talking to me," Thane said.

Mandell nodded. "I did. First time I ever saw a bull headed sheriff that I liked, too! I was afraid I was going to have to strong-arm you off of the place, Kilgore. And I wasn't sure I could do it. The sheriff gave a good out. Either you go and take the crew with you—making it appear strictly your idea—or you die under suspicious circumstances. I can fake them and make them stick with your friend Horner. You know that. And either way, I'm in the clear. I can handle Sue afterward, either way, too. It's your choice. You make it. Now!"

Thane scowled thoughtfully. There was a certain cleverness in Mandell and some iron. But not enough. He knew he could break this play wide—break the play and the man, both. One thing, only held him from it.

He knew where Hal Mandell stood and about how the rest of the man's play for single ownership of the ranch would go. He knew it was Hal who had fired the shot into his sister's room. But he didn't know—nor could he believe—that Mandell, who had just arrived at Powder Valley, eighteen miles away, had anything to do with the night attack which had cost Pop Wattle his life.

However badly Mandell wanted to drive Sue off of the ranch, Thane was convinced that another force wanted even more badly to rid Rowel of both of its new owners. Until that other force was driven into the open—more plainly, until Jack Anson and the wolves who rode his iron had been forced into the open and Thane's own position regarding the ranch was cleared—he knew he could not expose the man in front of him.

"All right, Mandell," Thane agreed woodenly. "We'll go. But it'll take a little time."

Mandell shoved his gun back into leather and grinned. "You're smart, Kilgore. After breakfast's soon enough. If I know Sue, she'll be in that office in there and into those papers as soon as it's light. Say you come in soon's you've eaten and check out. Draw your time and that for the rest of the crew. Make it scary when you do, and don't forget that if you change your mind, I can shoot you down like a dog. And with hardly any story, I'll get a nice pat on the back from the law for doing it!"

Thane nodded and swung down the steps toward the bunkhouse to join the rest of Gus Mandell's crew.

Breakfast that morning was a somber meal. Sue Mandell had insisted, against the shocked advice of Maria Lopez, that she and her brother eat in the kitchen with the hands.

Thane had gotten the boys out of their bunks early with word that they were quitting the ranch. All of them refused to listen until he finally turned out the whole story. They fell in with him, then. But during the meal they sat woodenly, every face turned with a galling and bitter scorn toward Hal Mandell.

If the girl's brother understood those looks, they didn't seem to trouble him. He talked a great deal to his sister, particularly about the wildness of Powder Valley and the unknown forces operating against their ranch. She seemed greatly concerned, but there was a determined set to her chin which didn't change. And when she had finished eating, she went directly to the office.

Her brother watched her go, then turned to Thane with plain meaning. Thane stood up, his eyes meeting those of the crew. The boys rose up after him and filed out into the yard. He left the table and followed Sue Mandell into the office.

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SHE was bent over the ledgers, checking figures on a scrap of paper beside her. She looked up, and seeing Thane, smiled broadly.

"Uncle Gus was a cowman, wasn't he?"

Her voice was throaty with admiration.

Thane appreciated that. He knew how much real understanding of the cattle trade it took to read either good or bad out of those records.

"The best!" he agreed.

"I could tell from his crew, if no other way," the girl went on. "They could all have spooked after what happened last night and new owners coming and all. They could have sat back this morning and checked everything to my brother and me, keeping their skins out of it. But I was watching them at breakfast—and watching you. There was fight in every eye I saw. I like fight, and Rowel needs it—a lot of it!"

It was like listening to old Gus again. Thane held himself tightly. "What about your brother?"

Unconscious tolerance crept into the girl's voice. "Hal wants silver in his pockets for the roulette wheel at Powder Valley. He wants money to spend and fancy gear and a top horse to ride. He wants land to look at and to call his own. If there has to be a fight for him to get it, why Hal will fight, too. . . . Don't count on my brother for anything, Mister Kilgore. But don't count him entirely out, either. Play him that way and you'll get along. I know. I've been doing it for years!"

Thane rolled the brim of his hat carefully, then straightened it. "The sheriff was here last night—"

Sue Mandell nodded. "Maria told me. Had he found out anything about the man we lost—this Pop Wattle?"

Thane's smile was wry. "Enough to make him think I had a hand in it. I don't reckon I'd be much good to you or Rowel, the way things are. I came in for my time, Miss Sue. . . ."

The girl came half way up out of the chair behind the desk. She stared in utter disbelief for a moment. Then Thane saw something ugly and bitter in her eyes.

"—and you're taking the rest of the crew with you!" she finished for him.

Thane nodded, knowing he'd have no tougher thing to face than this.

"I know better than to call you a coward, Thane Kilgore!" Sue said slowly. "You wouldn't run from sheriff or Satan! You are in this, then. Maybe you've stripped us of men. Maybe you think we're scared. Well, we are! But the Mandells aren't out of Rowel yet—and they aren't getting out. Remember that!"

She sank back into the chair then and dragged the dog eared checkbook from the center drawer of the desk. She found a pen and an ink bottle, thumbed swiftly through the ledgers to the payroll sheets, and presently the pen made angry, scratchy sounds on the green paper as she made out the checks.

Thane took up the checks one by one, signed a receipt for them, and went outside. Grinning wickedly, Hal Mandell was waiting there. The crew was drawn up beyond the rail. Sue ran to her brother.

"They're pulling out on us, Hal, every last one of them!" she cried.

Hal stood motionless. Thane went down the steps and swung up on his waiting mount.

The girl looked sharply at her brother. "Did you hear me, Hal?" she snapped, tears glinting back of her eyes. "They've quit us!"

Hal turned a lazy grin at her. "Take it easy, Sue," he counselled. "Since when did Mandells have to lean on yellow bellies like those?"

His scorn was punishing. Some of the boys raised angrily, but Thane put steel to his mount before any of them spoke. They wheeled and streamed out after him, riding silently and with angry swiftness. Where the trail took a bend around a low ridge, Thane pulled up and turned to the rest.

"Head on into Powder Valley. If

Suppose a pretty blonde cowgirl walked up and offered you a partnership in a promising business—what would you do? Maybe you'd do what Quent Russell did. You can check-up by taking a look-see at "Another Girl's Brand"—the feature novel in RANGELAND ROMANCES. On sale TODAY!

you're asked, I left you at the forks and cut down to the railroad, riding like I was bound out of state. The rest of you spread through town. Cash your checks, and be sure Art Horner sees plenty of you. Get as drunk as you can, but still stay sober. I'll look for you all under the big cutbank on Pony Creek two hours after dark."

The boys looked at each other. Thane saw they'd have to have a little more than this. He chuckled grimly. "If any of you are low on shells, stock up before night. You'll need 'em!"

CHAPTER THREE

Gathering of the Buzzards

WHEN the Rowel crew, riding now with brighter faces, hammered on toward Powder Valley, Thane lifted his bay against the ridge backing the trail, circling back toward the high hills. In an hour he was behind the Rowel buildings and far above them. He stopped here and scrutinized the country below. Finally he found what he was looking for. Already losing himself in a strip of broken country which separated Rowel graze from Jack Anson's Wheel, he saw a rider. It was Hal Mandell.

A suspicion, which had been growing in him since the talk on the verandah before dawn, now crystallized. He swung to saddle again, tipped down in a slanting circle, and raised his pace. By midmorning he was on Wheel grass and less than a mile behind Mandell. At noon he lifted onto a ridge to be above his man and cut the distance between them in half. Mandell was obviously killing time, waiting. Caution tightened in Thane.

Once, a little later, Thane thought he saw a rider crossing an open park on a slope to the southward. Powder Valley lay in that direction and he was uneasy. But there was no other sign and he finally decided he had been mistaken. Mandell, meanwhile, had pulled up beside a flat scabbing of rock to study a piece of paper he had dragged from his pocket. Then, apparently satisfied, he dismounted.

Thane cached his own horse in an aspen bosque a thousand feet above the outcropping, worked down the slope, and came to a stopping place in a sumac thicket within a hundred feet of Mandell.

It settled into a wait. Thane watched the sun anxiously. Finally, in late afternoon, a rider appeared at the foot of the little valley slanting down from the ledge. He was a tall, arrogantly made man on a striking black horse. He wore a flawless fawn Stetson, an expensive shirt, and whipcord breeches in cavalry boots. Even his guns were elegant, a silver mounted pair on either thigh like decorations.

Thane Kilgore grinned thinly. Anson's dress had drawn comment in these hills in the beginning. But not for long. Fancypants he was—he took pride in it. Elegant though the paired guns might be, they were no mere decorations. Jack Anson wore them for use, and he used them well.

The master of the Wheel trotted slowly up to the place where Hal Mandel sprawled waiting in the sun. Thane worked a little deeper into the sumac, coming up into easy earshot under the ledge. He was there when Anson quit his saddle.

"Mandell?" the Wheel owner called. Hal stirred with angry laziness.

"Yeah! Ten minutes more and you'd have drawn a blank, though. Your letter said you'd be here at noon, hombre!"

"Waiting won't hurt you!" Anson snapped. "I've been staking out my boys while you've been loafing here in the sun. I couldn't make it any sooner. How'd it go last night?"

Hal Mandell shook his head. "Just so-so. Sue's a funny girl. I wrote you that. Can't tell about her for sure. But I think the scare's on. That dead man you left back of the sheds last night hit her harder than it did the crew."

Anson grimaced. "I wanted to get Kilgore or that Prebble kid. I would draw the old man of the bunch! But it was dark, and I wasn't sure till I'd tagged him who he was. Then two of my boys slipped—softened up, I guess. They should have caved in Bud Tally's head. But they didn't, damn 'em! That crew has to be off of Rowel by tonight!"

Hal Mandell nodded lazily. "Take it easy, Anson," he said. "They're gone."

Anson eased visibly. "And Kilgore? You got him?"

"Not the way you wanted, Anson.

That's too much risk, cutting a man like that down, when there's another way. I jumped him early this morning—had a throwdown on him—but a better way worked out. He pulled out with the rest of the crew. And he'll keep on going!"

Anson swore savagely. "He will like hell! I told you Kilgore was our big fence. I told you that in every letter. You should have cut him down! Damn a man that goes soft on me. I should have crowded you and your sister both off of Rowel, the way I always figured I would with whoever got the place when Gus Mandell died! You don't know old Gus' foreman, if you think Thane Kilgore will clear the country while there's trouble at Rowel! The crew, maybe—but not Kilgore!"

Mandell chuckled and slid down the rock closer to Anson. Thane couldn't hear what passed between them for a moment. He guessed that Hal was spilling what he'd overheard Art Horner saying in the office at the Rowel. Anson, who had been obviously angry, eased as Hal talked.

Suddenly Mandell drew back. ". . . so that fixes Kilgore," he concluded. "And it ties the sheriff up, watching him. Both'll be busy with each other. That's good, friend, and you know it. Now, Anson, in the first letter you wrote me after my uncle's will was filed, right when you were first laying out this scheme, you mentioned an agreement on paper, showing I'd have a half interest in the combined ranches when we'd pushed Rowel and your spread together. When I left home, I wrote you to bring it here today. Shell out!"

Jack Anson pushed his hat back. "I've been after Rowel a long time, Mandell. The two spreads together will be worth four times what either one of 'em is alone. I'll split, all right. I can afford to. But I'm not carrying a paper around tying me into this thing. It might get into the wrong hands. When the smoke's clear you'll have your half—if you play it on out straight and sharp!"

Hal Mandell growled angrily.

Anson shrugged, and went on: "Now, I sent my boys off through Powder Valley this morning. They were to pick up some grub in town, like they'd be gone quite a spell. Then they were heading into high country where I've got a patch of leased range. Horner would see them go. He won't know that right now they're riding the hocks off of their horses to swing around up back of us by nightfall.

"As soon as its dark, they're hitting the Rowel fence. By midnight, nine tenths of Rowel's top stock will be shoved up into a box canyon six-seven miles back into the hills. We'll hold 'em there till the deal's done. They're not likely to be found. If they are prowled into, we'll plant the prowler. The thing's all set, except for you and your sister!"

Mandell leaned f o r w a r d, scowling. "What about Sue? I told you I'd take care of her!"

Anson nodded and grinned. "Sure! You were going to cut Kilgore down, too. But you hatched up another angle. It worked. The next one you hatch might not. We can't take a risk, now. Like it or not, Mandell, some of my boys are swinging into Rowel and picking up your sister. She'll be scared but she won't be hurt. When she sees enough light to put a pen to paper, she'll be turned loose over in the next county somewhere, with a railroad ticket in her pocket to Santa Fe!"

Hal Mandell stood up, his face white and cut by tight lines. "Listen here, Anson," he ground out, "I'll force Sue to a sell-out at my price. But I'll be damned if I'll let one of your range wolves touch her!"

Anson didn't seem to move, but one of his ornate guns was suddenly half clear of leather. He held it there for a moment, then let it drop back with a cool grin.

"We'd better understand each other, Mandell," he said softly. "If you were dead, I wouldn't have to worry about squeezing Rowel. It'd belong to your sister, then. And there's other ways of getting something from a woman besides scaring her to death. A couple of my boys saw her when you got off the train. They said she was worth a little powder. And I've got powder to spend. There's one chamber marked for you, any time you ask for it!"

Mandell's face whitened. He stood rigid with anger and obviously aware Anson could kill him at will. The Wheel boss watched him for a long moment. Then he swung easily up onto his horse and

rode back the way he had come to keep his appointment with the new owner of the Rowel.

Thane remained hidden until Hal slid from the ledge of rock, mounted his own horse, and headed up-country, in the direction of the Rowel.

* * *

Kilgore rode slowly away from the ledge where the meeting he had overheard had taken place. Jack Anson was playing for keeps this time, and Thane could not help feeling a little sorry for Hal Mandell. The man was out of his class.

The whole thing was pretty plain. As soon as Gus Mandell's heirs were known, Anson must have written to the nephew. Hal had seen an easy way to half ownership, not in one ranch but two. He had played along. Thane wondered if Mandell now knew where he stood.

Thane was certain Anson would not cut Sue Mandell's brother into the final play. The plans for the attack on the Rowel herds was a blind to hide from Hal or the sheriff or even Thane, himself, the importance of the sortie which was to lift Sue out of the Rowel house.

She wouldn't be turned loose in the next county. She wouldn't know that it was Wheel hands who held her. She'd only know that after a time allowed for her terror to grow, Anson would appear. Her brother would be dead. She'd be alone and helpless. Her crew would be gone and her ranch, as far as she knew, gutted.

Most likely she'd believe that her uncle's foreman, Thane Kilgore, was back of all of these things. Certainly she'd be made to believe this, if Anson could tag Thane, somewhere along the line.

With all of this behind her and little toward which to look forward, it would be neither a tribute to Anson's charm nor a sign of weakness in the girl that she should turn to him. He would bring rescue and apparent help when she needed it most. And Anson would have won his battle.

Thane knew, as he pulled out of the little valley, that he was riding no more for the survival of the ranch which had so long been his home iron than he was for the safety of the girl who had inherited half of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun Showdown at the Rowel

THE Rowel crew was gathered at the cutbank on Pony Creek when Thane arrived. And they had company. Sitting a gray horse which stood heavy-headed from hard riding and showing the marks of many hours in the saddle in his own slack frame, Sheriff Art Horner was waiting with them.

"I beat you ten minutes, Thane!" he said wryly.

In that instant Thane knew he had not been the only man who heard the parley between Anson and Hal Mandell. He had not, he now knew, been mistaken when he thought earlier he had seen a man crossing a park on the slopes above him.

Horner grinned wearily. "The Wheel crew came through town early, all of them. Said they were going up to Anson's leased range. But one man could work all the stuff Wheel's got up there, and then it would take him only half a day. I was thinking about this when Rowel came in, claiming things was too tough under their new owners, and they'd quit. First time I'd ever seen anything too tough for a Rowel man! Then they began to swear you'd quit, too, and had lit down the tracks toward the big towns. I knew it was time to ride, then.

"I missed you half the morning. Finally I spotted you and rode the seat off my britches. When I come up, I seen you was following young Mandell. I tagged along to see what went on—and I saw! Thane, I owe you an apology!"

Thane grinned without humor. "This is showdown, Art. You riding with us?"

"Showdown for me, you mean!" the sheriff grunted. "You think I'll let a cattle war start right under my nose? Tag along if you want to, Thane. But don't start anything. That's my job. And don't give any orders to these boys of yours. They don't belong to you tonight. I've deputized them!"

Thane swore. Horner was a fool if he thought a man and a badge could stop the tangle which loomed ahead. But he shrugged. It made little difference. When the tangle came, Horner would be one more gun on the right side.

"We'd better be moving," he suggested crisply. "That bunch heading for the house will be ready to jump the minute Anson's big crew cuts the fence. We've got to be there then!"

"At the house?" Horner shook his head. "Like hell! You heard Anson say the girl wouldn't be hurt. Housebreaking ain't much of a charge. But I can make cattle stealing stick and stick tight. I want some certain customers for my nice little jail and I'm going after 'em—at the fence!"

Thane swore again. But he knew the uselessness of trying to get Horner to split up his crew. The sheriff had made up his stubborn mind and it would stay the way he had made it.

Minutes later, when the file of riders was threading a narrow place in the trail, Thane dropped to the rear and angled silently off into the timber. . . .

The Rowel looked peaceful as Thane Kilgore dismounted on the slope back of the ranch and started a swinging, soundless trot downward. Lights were up in the kitchen and the office. He drove toward this corner room, cutting distance rapidly. But he was still three hundred yards short of the house when the first alarm beat up. It was a heavy crash, followed almost immediately by a woman screaming out a man's name—not in fear, but in warning.

"Hal!"

Then gun-thunder shattered the night, rolling hollowly as though the shots were fired inside of the house. Coming up from the rear, Thane had intended to circle to the front of the sprawled building to reach the office through the verandah door. He discarded that, now; took three long strides as he reached the rear wall, and rose in a flat, arrow-like dive.

With one of his hands gripping his gun and both of them held out ahead of him to save his throat and face from glass, he went through a small window giving into the rear end of the main hall. He landed on the polished floor on his shoulders and skidded against a table, knocking it over.

He rolled away from this, kicked his feet under him, and lurched into the wide living room. Four men were there.

Hal Mandell, half-sagged against the wall, was to one side of the door leading into the office. Another man stood just inside the shattered front door, astraddle the chopping log which had been used to batter the portal open. Thane recognized this one as a Wheel rider. Two more of Anson's men were well out into the room, about half way from the front door to the stairs, on the lower steps of which Sue Mandell was crouching. Thane had a glimpse of more men on the verandah.

His entrance had been so sudden that action stopped in mid-motion for a flashing instant. The instant passed and guns roared. Thane leaned into the recoil of his own gun and skewered the man beside the front door. The fellow fell across the chopping log and another dodged in from the verandah to take his place.

This newcomer slanted a quick shot at Thane which pulled him around and weighted him down to one knee. Hanging there for a moment, trying to shake off the shock, Thane saw a fighting man die.

He had vaguely realized as he plunged into the room that Hal Mandell's slackness indicated the man had made a stand and had been hit. He didn't realize how many times Hal had been hit until the man staggered away from the wall. The smooth planking against which he had been tilted was riddled, and every bullet had passed through his body.

The two Wheel riders in the center of of the room had shoved on toward the stairs with the evident intention of reaching the girl.

Mandell swung his increasingly heavy gun on them and hit the rear one with three deliberate shots. His gun empty, Hal stood there, weaving, until yet another man shot him again.

Mandell half turned at this new hurt, took one pleading step toward his sister, and fell heavily. Thane came up as the man went down. As he came, he angled a slug upward through the body of the remaining man working toward the stairs.

Another shot snapped from the doorway. He felt it pull him and a moment later a queer, stinging sensation ran through the muscles along one side of his back as though a giant had wrapped a smoking plaited lash there. With the room clear behind him, Thane let the pull of this last slug turn him and he started toward the door and the two men there still on their feet.

Things were getting hazy for Thane. His gun jumped rhythmically, and he felt the shock of another falling body against the floor. He vaguely realized only one man was still facing him. His eyes saw the man's feet, registered the fact they wore cavalry boots. He forced his gaze upward to Jack Anson's face whose guns smashed doubly at him.

Thane sat down, then. And sitting, he took meticulous care with his aim. His gun roared. It kept on roaring. When the hammer fell on empty chambers, Jack Anson lay on his face.

Thane tried to clear the haze from his eyes, but couldn't do it. He tried to turn so that he could see Sue. He couldn't do this. He was wondering about it, beginning to feel a man's fear that this time he has been hit for keeps, when there was a tumult beyond the verandah and more figures leaped for the door.

Thane knew his gun was empty. But it seemed to make no difference. He raised it carefully. Art Horner and Bill Prebble, piling through the doorway abreast, halted in horror at the upraised, steady weapon. When the hammer fell with a dead click, they plowed on into the room.

Others came after them. He heard Sue Mandell begin to sob quietly behind him. Horner crossed to her.

"Easy, now, girl," the sheriff said gently. "It's all over! We got every one of 'em at the fence—and it looks like Thane's cleaned the coyotes here. . . ."

Thane heard this and dragged himself around with an effort. "Me, hell!" he croaked. "It was Hal Mandell—"

Then things went black. . . .

IN MIDSUMMER Tom Faraday drove Thane Kilgore out to the Rowell from the train which had brought him back from the hospital at Santa Fe. He was stiff and pale and had a good many hours in the saddle ahead before he'd shake out the kinks which had been driven into him. And the surgeons at Santa Fe had counted his recovery from the day a letter had come from Art Horner saying Rowell still needed him.

But it wasn't Rowell that was bringing him back, and he knew it. It wasn't even a desire to see Sue Mandell again, though that desire was strong. They had called him the grass-country iron man at Santa Fe—those doctors who were used to patching shattered bodies. They had made a lot out of the punishment he had taken. But he knew he wasn't the real iron man of the war with the Wheel. And he wanted to see justice done. That's why he was going back.

He was going back, now, to let Sue Mandell know that in his eyes, at least, her brother had justified the blood to which he had been born. He was going back to let her know that so long as he lived, he would never see the equal of the stand Hal Mandell had made against a wall, with a bullet-studded plank between his shoulder blades.

He thought about it all the way to the ranch. He was thinking about it when Sue came down the stairs to meet him. And he kept on thinking about it when he wanted to think only about her.

Sue smiled at him, then. "Hal came home from that meeting with Jack Anson and told me the whole story, Thane," she said quietly. "We talked it over and decided to make a stand when they came for me. Hal didn't talk much after they came into the yard. Know what the last thing he said was? 'Don't worry, Sis. Kilgore's on the loose. He was Uncle Gus' foreman. He'll be here when powder starts to burn!'"

The girl paused. "Art Horner had me file a damage suit while you were gone. I won. The Wheel is ours, now, too!"

"Ours?"

"You're still foreman of the Rowel, aren't you, Thane?"

The girl's voice was husky with things not to be said in words. Thane let these go for now. It was enough that there was somebody on the ranch who could do the book-work in the office. The grass and the slopes and the stock on them needed him, as he needed the open and the sun.

It was all right, too. For the big moons came in October when much of this work would be done, and there would be time for talking of other things with his new boss. . . .

THE END

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THE DEVIL WALKS WITH SUDDEN JOHN!

By Dee Linford

Sudden John Irons would rather be shot than see the son of his old friend hang for a murder that the kid hadn't committed.... But a jury had found the youngster guilty, a judge had sentenced him—and it was up to John Irons, himself, to spring the waiting gallows trap!

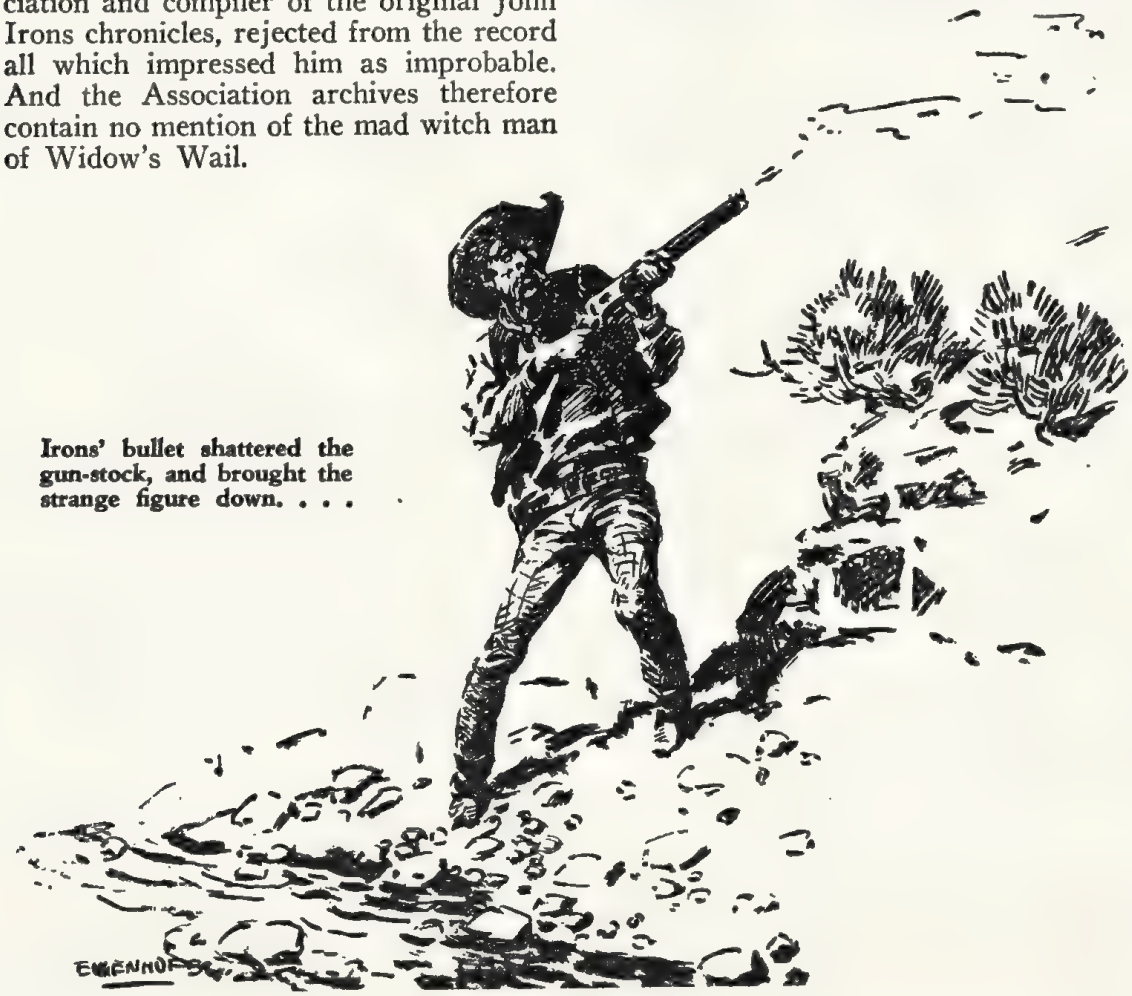
CHAPTER ONE

A Noose-Job for Sudden John

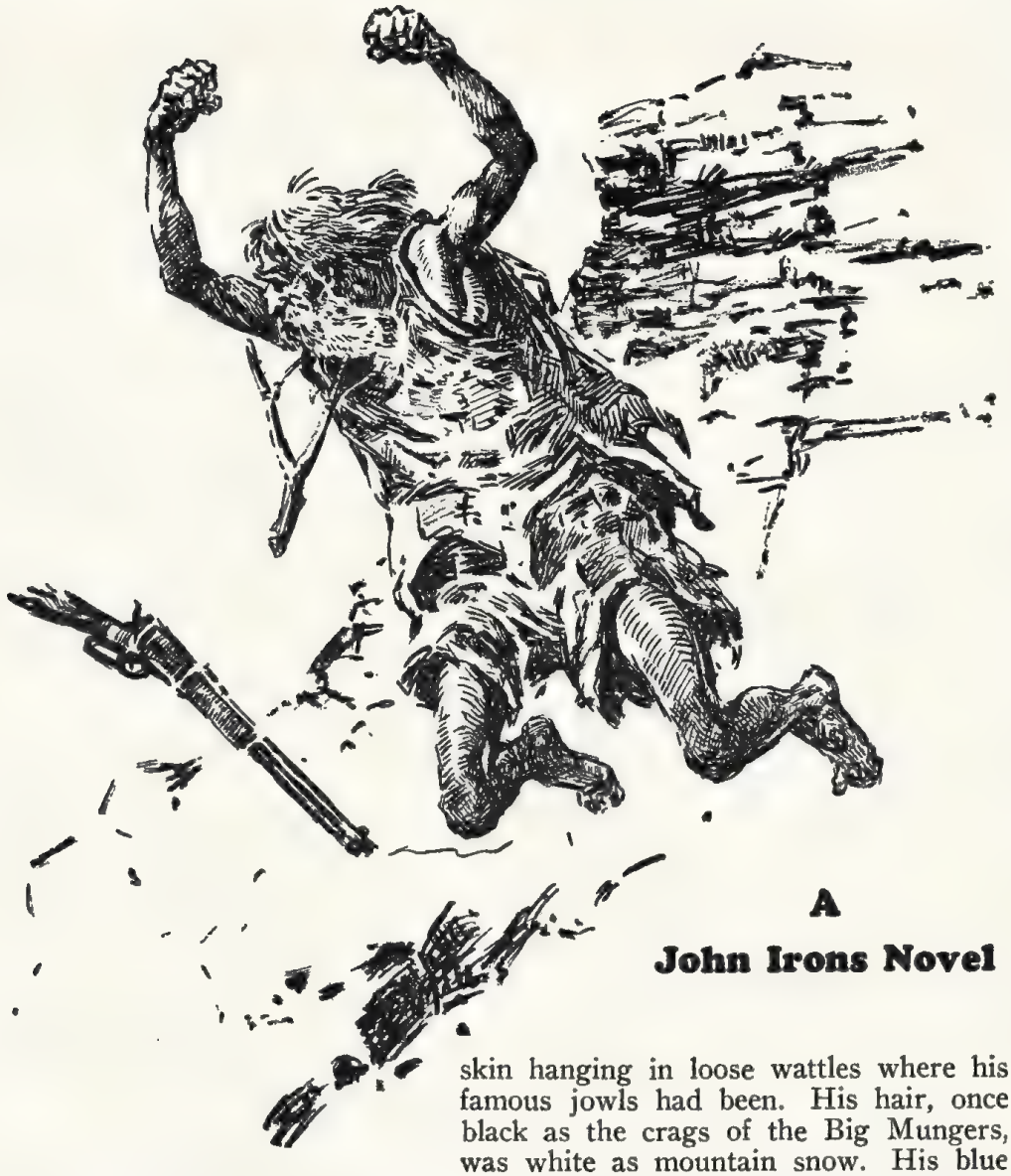
OREGON ROB McDADE, executive secretary of the Wyoming Anti Horse and Cow Thief Association and compiler of the original John Irons chronicles, rejected from the record all which impressed him as improbable. And the Association archives therefore contain no mention of the mad witch man of Widow's Wail.

Men are living, who heard this tale from the lips of Sudden John himself. And, for these, no further authentication is required.

It all began—so goes the story—the day the range detective dropped into Hardpan, the sun-baked dry farmer's town at the



Irons' bullet shattered the gun-stock, and brought the strange figure down. . . .



A John Irons Novel

edge of the snag-toothed Munger Mountains, in Wyoming. He had ridden the two hundred miles from Cheyenne at the urgent request of Sheriff Sam Strombotany, a life-long friend and colleague. And when he entered the lawman's office, just at dusk, he had an intuitive feeling that he'd walked into something he could not lightly step out of.

When his eyes adjusted to the gloom of the room's cheerless interior, he got a better view of Strombotany's rugged features. And his feeling was that of a man who looks into the face of a friend, but is met by the eyes of a corpse.

Big in a way that dwarfed John Irons' lean height, old Sam loomed mountainous behind his littered, spur-scarred desk. His once full face was drawn and haggard, the skin hanging in loose wattles where his famous jowls had been. His hair, once black as the crags of the Big Mungers, was white as mountain snow. His blue eyes were dull with loneliness and pain, like the eyes of a trapped and dying animal.

John Irons thought of the Sam Strombotany who had been a legend throughout the Territory for his bluff and genial ways as well as for his tremendous courage and integrity, and slow anger kindled inside him.

"That really you, John?" the whipped hulk demanded eagerly. "God, you're a sight for sore eyes! I ain't a prayin' man, John, but I've prayed you'd show up, t'day. . . ."

The old man said more, but John Irons' eyes were attracted to the open door which led into the jail. And his whole attention was absorbed by what he saw.

A kerosene lamp was burning on a table in front of the cell at the end of the long

line of bleak, steel-ribbed cages. Barely visible in the lamp's pale yellow glow was a young woman, seated in a high-backed rocking chair. A book was open on her knees, and she bent close to the printed page as she rocked, as if reading from its text.

John Irons' anger waned at that strange scene, and the aura of tragedy and danger returned, sharper and more disturbing than before. For he knew that last barred cage was the death cell, the last stop on the slow trail to death, by way of Hardpan's rickety gallows. And the lighted lamp in front told him the death cell was occupied. It told him the death watch for some luckless man had begun.

But he couldn't fit the lady into it, and he shrank from trying. "I see you got a county guest," he remarked, stirring himself uneasily, "back in the ice box."

Old Strombotany gave him a nod, and into his eyes came a look so intense and so awfully naked that the Association man's spine went cold.

It's my boy, Tim," the old man said abruptly then. "I'm a-hangin' him, day after tomorrow. The waitin' is wearin' me down. . . ."

The hoarse voice petered out, and John Irons waited, watching for sign which would betray the statement as a grim sort of jest. But no such indication came. And a damp, cold feeling spread inside him.

"Anne Deane, Timmy's girl, is settin' up for the watch," the old man continued, when his voice was under control again. "There ain't any parson hereabouts. An' Anne—well, Anne's a readin' Timmy the Scripture."

John Irons' eyes went back, unbidden, to the open door. And through the silence which dragged into the office on the old man's words, a voice was audible. A low, clear voice, as soothing and reassuring as a mother's lullaby to a fretful child:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me;

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. . . ."

A door in John Irons' mind opened as he listened, permitting him a remembered image of the tow-headed kid he had taught to straddle a horse and dally a rope, and his own cup spilled over. Eavesdropping on that soft voice suddenly seemed as sacrilege, and he attempted to drown the sound of it with sound of his own.

"What's Timmy done, to deserve hangin'?"

Strombotany spoke slowly, laboriously, like a child putting words together for the first time.

"Timmy killed his ranchin' pardner. A two-bit, panhandlin', blood-suckin' remittance man, name of Demps Rudd. But a man, in the eyes o' the law. I warned Timmy away f'm him, but Timmy wouldn't hear me. . . ."

★

JOHN IRONS was shocked to realize Timmy was old enough to be ranching. But his interest in the matter was not all personal. He was accustomed by his calling to digesting and assimilating apparently unrelated facts to form an overall picture. And he missed no bets.

Strombotany said, "Him an' this Demps Rudd took a crack at ranchin', up on Widder's Wail. But they wa'n't makin' it go. Tim hired out this spring to the 76, to make their tax an' provin' money. He was gone all summer, an' come home a while ago. He'd heard tell his gal had been runnin' with Demps, an' he'd ben hittin' the bottle—"

"His gal? The same that's back there with 'im now?"

Again the lawman nodded, and spoke with new spirit. "Schoolmar'm here, an' the best female that ever seen the west slope of the Big Mungers, outside o' Timmy's own ma. Anne an' Timmy had it fixed to stand b'fore a preacher come fall. An' there wa'n't nothing to what Timmy heard about her goin' with Demps. He'd of knowed that, if the whiskey hadn't ben workin' on him."

John Irons could see what was coming, and he muttered in protest against it. "Couldn't you of got to Timmy, through the whiskey?"

Strombotany bristled defensively at the oblique accusation. "I didn't see 'im. I was up in the hills, lookin' for a horse

track. When I got back Red Ira Shane told me Timmy'd ben in Ira's bar, drinkin' heavy an' makin' graveyard talk about Demps Rudd. Timmy was gone, an' I changed horses an' rode out to the homestead. When I got there, Tim was passed out on the crick bank, an' the cabin was on fire. Demps wasn't nowhere around.

"I rolled Timmy over an' sloshed his head in the crick. When he come to, he looked at the burnin' cabin like a crazy man. I mentioned Demps, an' Timmy started yellin' an' runnin' for the cabin. It was burned down an' fallin' in, an' hottern' the mill-tails o' hell. But Tim would of staggered into it, if I'd let 'im. I had to knock him out."

The old man's face was no longer visible through the gloom. There was only his bearish hulk against the pale light from the jail door. His voice was hushed and strained as he recounted the events of that other pitch black night up on the Widow's Wail.

"I throwed Tim crosswise o' my saddle, an' packed him inta town. I threw his haunches in jail an' organized a posse an' went back. We carried water from the crick in our hats, an' had the fire cooled by sun-up. We raked them black timbers back, an' found what was left o' Demps Rudd. It wasn't much, but enough to make shore who we had. Demps Rudd had a club foot."

John Irons, absorbed in the old man's uncolored account of his own son's crime, hung onto his every word—weighing and tagging each bit of information, filing it away in his mind for future reference.

"What," he demanded impatiently, "did Timmy have to say?"

"Said the worst thing any man could, the way things stood. Said the ride out to the ranch sobered him up—after I'd already found him blind drunk an' stinkin' o' sour mash. Said he seen be'fore he got to the homestead that Anne wouldn't do no such thing as he'd heard tell, an' he wasn't mad when he seen Demps. Said Demps jumped him, though, 'bout bein' drunk. Said Demps got in a lucky punch, an' he didn't remember no more."

John Irons heard, and his teeth closed with an audible click. For of all the many alibies he'd heard in his long career, this one about things going black just at the right time was the weakest of them all. It not only was a left-handed admission of guilt. It was a coward's way of dodging a straight plea, and of leaving the gate open for an insanity plea in case the jury found against him.

But there still was a picture in John Irons' memory of the tow-headed kid with the admiring eyes, and the Association man's loyalty remained unshaken. He was still in Timmy's corner, and in the old man's last words he saw a faint ray of hope.

"If this Demps Rudd was what you say, Timmy might be speakin' the truth. Least, he's got a case."

But the sheriff shook his head. His breathing was irregular and labored, like that of a man in physical pain. "It's too late to find a case for Timmy. The travelin' judge from Sheridan brung his county seat down here a week ago, special for Tim. Timmy got a fair try, an' a jury found him guilty. It's all over now, but the hang—" he gulped— "but what's left to be did."

"You could appeal," John Irons held out stubbornly. "Killin' in self-defense ain't a hangin' crime in this Territory."

But the old man took no heart. "There ain't any self-defense angle, for Timmy. Demps Rudd's skull was smashed by a .45 caliber slug. From behind!"

Big Sam's voice cracked over that last word. And John Irons' stubborn hope turned cold. For there could be little doubt now that the jury had found right. There could be little doubt that Timmy had committed a cowardly and cold-blooded murder, then had lied—and lied badly—in an effort to escape paying the bill.

That being the case, the Association man could feel no more remorse for Timmy. But for the father, shamed and grief-stricken and charged with the job of exacting the law's supreme penalty from his own son, John Irons felt a choking compassion.

A rebellious loathing for the law they both served arose inside him. And when at length he perceived why the old man had sent for him, he found himself prepared to comply with the request. It would, of course, end his career with the Stockmen's Association, and with every other enforcement agency in the land. . . .

"Sam," he said softly, sparing his friend the embarrassment of voicing the proposal, "it's dark outside, and' nobody about. I reckon Timmy's gal wouldn't spread any alarm, if I knocked you on the head an' tied you to yore chair, an' sprung Timmy out. You wouldn't be found till mornin'. An' by mornin', Timmy an' I could be in Montana. . . ."

He let the thought die with his voice. For he perceived even through the darkness that he'd said the wrong thing. Old Strombotany's eyes glinted suddenly, and a hint of his old fire and pride burned in his voice.

"John, I've run this jail nigh onto twenty years without losin' a prisoner. An' I don't aim to start now. But I've hung other men's sons that had it comin', an' in the eyes o' the law Timmy ain't no different from them. Timmy will take his medicine, same as the others."

The old man's tone was gruff—the voice of the law, resenting interference. But beneath the blustering overtone, John Irons sensed another thing. There he heard the voice of the father, disgraced and crushed and desolate.

John Irons knew that after a long and bitter struggle, the father had yielded to the firmer will of the proud badge-toter who could not make exception to the law's hard code. Not even for his only son. And he knew that in the face of this integrity, he was utterly helpless to do anything which might aid or comfort either of them.

"I was only tryin' to help," he apologized humbly. "An' I reckon I was wrong. But if ever there *is* anything I can do—"

He knew the offer was empty, and he didn't bother to finish. But to his surprise, Sam Strombotany rose to his words like a drowning man to a rope.

"It's a lot to ask, John," the old man said eagerly. "I wouldn't ask it of no other. But if you'd see your way clear to take it off my hands. . ."

"Off yore hands?" John Irons started. "What you mean?"

Big Sam stirred his ponderous bulk. "If you'd swear in, as special deputy, I'd resign the badge t'morrow. That 'ud leave you actin' sheriff an' in charge here till—well, till this thing's over."

John Irons' blood had turned to ice. He stared at his friend, and suddenly the gulf between them seemed to widen. "Why me, Sam? To me, Timmy's like my own kin? Ain't there others here would do the job?"

"There's others," Strombotany conceded, through his great disappointment. "The grangers has already offered to take it over. They've offered to take Timmy up to Sheridan, an' git it done there. But I don't want that. Us Strombotanys is used to doin' for ourselves. We take care our ailin' ones, an' we bury our own dead. We don't hold with handin' our sick an' our dead over to strangers who don't care nothing for them—just to git shed of a chore that ain't pleasant. . . ."

"But, Lord, man, you can't—"

"It'll be bad enough for Timmy," the old man went on, his voice as dry as wind on dead leaves, "if he's got somebody close to him to climb the steps with 'im, an' do what's got to be did. I could of turned 'im over to you. You've allus ben like one o' the fambly. But I won't hand him over to no strangers. I'll do for him m'self b'fore I'll do that. It won't be easy, but I'll do it. . . ."

The voice petered out, and there was only the darkness and the impassive bulk of the old lawman, like an image cast in heavy metal. A monument to the inexorable concept of law.

It came to John Irons then how short he had fallen of measuring up as a man, to his friend's stature. Big Sam had set into motion the machinery which would take his own son's life. He asked no favors for Timmy. None except that someone other than himself actually take the life he had caused to be born. Someone from whom the kid could draw some measure of comfort, in his last moment.

There was only one such person in the world. And John Irons in his cowardice had refused to fill the need. His refusal had doomed Timmy to die by his own father's hand.

Though the thought of actually slipping the noose around Timmy's throat brought cold sweat to his temples, John Irons knew that he'd do it when the time came. He had no choice.

"On second thought, Sam," he said softly, his hand firm on his friend's thick

shoulder, "I'll swear to that badge, an' all else that goes with it. "An' I'll—I'll be right proud!"

One of Strombotany's great paws found his hand and gripped it until he winced. Beyond that simple, eloquent gesture, the old man gave no sign he'd heard. And, in the dark chambered silence, the gentle voice from the jail was audible once more:

"And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he wept, thus he said,

" 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!' "

CHAPTER TWO

At Murder Ranch

JOHN IRONS was in the saddle early, and the sun over the snow-capped peaks found him threading the coils of the unhurried stream called Widow's Wail. He was following the dim horse trail which would take him to the ranch where had occurred the killing which had drawn him into the tragic case of Timmy Strombotany, and had placed him against the flame.

It was unfriendly country, where even the frugal, bone-hard dirt farmers had shrunk from driving down stakes. But a man might ranch it there, if he had gravel where gravel was needed, and a little water, and enough money-backing to help him over the rough places.

Timmy Strombotany had gravel, if he were anything like the man who had sired him. And he had water, of a kind, in the lean, sun-baked creek whose name attested to the grief earlier homesteaders had come to on its ugly cutbanks. But Timmy had started out on a shoe-string. And it wasn't country for shoe-string ranching. Anyhow, Timmy was in jail, convicted of murder, and due to hang next morning.

John Irons had ample time to ponder that fact, and the fact as well that it was he who must knot the rope around Timmy's throat, when next the sun looked over the jagged Mungers. It was John Irons who must snuff out a life not yet half lived—the life of a kid who had once looked on him as a sort of second father—while all Hardpan's populace looked on. And he couldn't help thinking how easy it would be to just keep riding, until the Big Mungers' ugly cones were no more than sharp-tipped barbs in his memory.

But even as he considered this, he knew inside him he would be on hand next day. He could no more act contrary to his nature than could the coward who killed stealthily from behind, out of fear or greed for gain.

Was Timmy Strombotany such a coward? John Irons had pondered that question without letup, ever since his conversations with Big Sam. He had no real basis to doubt it, but he was certain to the depths of his being that Timmy was innocent.

That knowledge would make his job doubly hard next morning. And he toyed with the idea of returning to the jail that night, getting the drop on Big Sam, and forcing a break. But he had a hunch that even if Big Sam didn't shoot him, Timmy would not make the break.

Big Sam's own blood flowed in the kid's veins. And if the old man's stubborn pride and unyielding sense of justice could force him to send his only son to the gibbet, the same qualities in the son would force him to meet his tryst with death calmly and with dignity, and with words for comfort for his hangman father.

It was incredulous and beyond understanding. Yet it fitted in with all John Irons knew of the father and son.

The country became rougher as he approached the mountains and the place where he would find the burned-out homestead. The trail grew steeper, the going slower, and the creek ran swifter and clearer. And as he neared his destination, the premonition of danger he had felt in the sheriff's office the night before returned to him, stronger than before.

It was as if a dark and menacing cloud had come between him and the sun. Yet the sun shone brightly, with no hint of a cloud in all the sky. And even Wagon, his big dun gelding, showed signs of uneasiness, as if the horse, too, sensed the threatening presence of evil.

He came upon the homestead unexpectedly, and was relieved in spite of himself to find no living thing in sight. There

had only been a cabin and a couple of pole corrals beside a deep ravine that led down into the creek's shallow canyon. Now there were corrals alone, beside a blackened scar on the ground.

He dismounted at the corrals, tied the snorting dun by his reins, and covered the rest of the distance on foot.

It had seemed important, back in town, for him to ride out to the scene of the murder and look around, before hanging a man he believed innocent. But now that he was on the ground, he knew he had made the ride not on the strength of finding new evidence in Timmy's favor, but to escape the ordeal of waiting, with old Sam, for the hour of the hanging.

There was nothing to see but the blackened disorder of logs still forming a rough rectangle about the thick carpet of ashes, where the cabin had stood. But, lacking more profitable activity, he took a final look at the country around, and kicked idly among the ashes.

One foot turned up a blackened skillet whose structure had withstood the heat of the fire, and on impulse he stooped to pick it up. As he did so, an insect buzzed angrily at his ear. The ashes before him at the same instant exploded in a grayish black cloud that engulfed him.

Only then, crouched beside the worthless pan which had saved his life, did he hear the report of the gun which had tried to kill him. Long accustomed to acting ahead of thought, he took advantage of the dust screen, leaped over the crazily canted logs, and fell flat behind the thick barrier, his rifle still in his hands.

He was none too soon.

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THE gun—a high-powered rifle by the sound—spoke twice more, raking the ash-strewn rectangle with a murderous, contained fire. John Irons felt the shock of the lead pounding into the logs which shielded him. And the added dust raised by the barrage choked and blinded him.

Trusting that it would conceal him from the hidden gunman, he took a long chance and crawled for the shelter of the ravine.

He reached the brink of the draw and rolled to the bottom, without attracting fire, for the rifle was still raking the cabin's burned-out enclosure.

Sudden John lay where he'd stopped rolling, rubbing the dust from his eyes and breathing the free air. The relief he felt did not spring altogether from the fact that he had reached temporary safety. Some measure of it arose from the fact that the invisible evil which had threatened him was at last out into the open.

Suddenly the shooting stopped, as if the ambusher were pausing to reload. John Irons came up to a crouch, his rifle ready. But he didn't dare show his head above the sagebrush rim. Minutes passed while he continued to crouch, his stinging eyes alert, his ears straining. At last, he concluded the dry-gulch rifleman was waiting until he could observe the results of his fire before exposing himself.

John Irons' mind had been desperately at work, and the conclusion brought with it a plan. The ravine opened on the creek's canyon, and hundred feet or so from where he sat. And the hidden rifleman must be somewhere in that canyon. For the deep cut offered the only concealment within half a mile of the murder ranch.

If John Irons could reach the canyon unobserved, he might outflank his unknown enemy and take him from behind.

Acting before the dust cloud should lift from the cabin site and betray his absence, he Indianed down the draw toward the creek, his eyes on the lip of the ravine above him.

He reached the canyon, and wriggled like a snake into the dense tangle of stunted willow which fringed the Widow's Wail. After an eternity of painful inching and pulling himself on his elbows and toes, he reached the water's edge. There he froze against the ground, staring at a track in the mud before him.

A track left by a bare human foot. A foot which left a print of a size that John Irons couldn't have covered with both his own oversize boots!

As the Association man's neck as he looked at it, something stirred in the back of his memory; something ugly and chilling and preposterous—a tale he had heard years before, and had forgotten.

It was the story of the mad witch man of Widow's Wail—the strange, demented hermit who lived like a coyote, in a cave

somewhere in the Widow's Wail's high cutbank.

"Chaws raw meat, them that's been around him say," Sam Strombotany had said once, in speaking of the mad hermit. "He'd sooner find it dead than kill it, an' he'd stink a dog off a gut wagon. He's never turned his hand at workin' sence I ben in the country, 'cept to witch wells for the dirt farmers that get tired o' haulin' crick water in a milk can five-ten miles.

"It's uncanny, the way he finds water in this dried out country, with his little forked applewood wand. Folks claim he sold his soul to the devil to get the power, but I don't take no stock in no devil-talk. Though one thing's shore: Death follers his tracks, like a buzzard. Wherever he goes, there's a killin', an' a hangin'. But we ain't never hung the hermit. . . . If he's got a Christian name, ain't nobody ever heard it. So they just call him the mad witch man. . . ."

So much had sight of the singular footprint dragged out of John Irons' memory when he was startled out of his rumination by a pebble dropping from a twenty-foot cliff, almost directly above him. A single, rolling pebble which sounded to his ears like a landslide. He turned slowly, expecting a bullet in his brain at every second.

At first he saw nothing. Then his gaze lifted up the steep rock bank. And the sight which met his eyes was the strangest he'd ever seen.

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UNCERTAIN at first whether the incongruous figure was man or beast, or something from another world, John Irons remained motionless, watching it. Long and lean as a whipsnake, it hung by its elbows to the top of the cliff, twenty feet up, its huge bare paddle feet hanging free.

It was hatless, and its dirty, sun-bleached hair strung down like a horse's unkempt mane. Its nose was long and hooked, and its mouth was lost in the tangle of its mustache and horsetail beard, filled with cockle burrs, small twigs and loam.

Its clothes, comprised bits of denims, canvas, burlap and horsehide, held together by Indian bone buttons, buckskin loops, and ten-penny nails, used as pins. The arms were bare from the shoulders. The legs from the knees, and the skin was burned a rich tobacco brown.

Around the creature's neck a forked branch of applewood was slung on a buckskin cord, like a rustic locket. And John Irons almost forgot to breathe. He had run afoul of the mad witch man of Widow's Wail!

Totally unaware of John Irons in the canyon below him, the eccentric figure watched the burned-out cabin narrowly, its face a study in diabolic concentration. The sun glinted on the barrel of the rifle that rested on the ledge before him, a rifle which, in contrast to the man, was clean and oiled and polished. And as John Irons watched, the witch man lifted one huge bare foot and with it scratched his other leg in short, jerking motions. Like the twitching of a cougar's tail as it crouches, otherwise immobile, watching its pray.

Sudden John's memory of the cowardly and unprovoked attack stirred his anger, and that anger mounted as the mad hermit continued to watch the cabin site from his place of concealment, ready to resume firing at first sight of his victim.

John came abruptly to his feet. He had the drop, as cold as man could have, and his anger made him reckless. He made no effort to move quietly, and he cocked his rifle before it was leveled to fire. And his carelessness almost cost his life.

Hearing the *click* behind him, the witch man grasped the cliff's face with his ten muscular toes, as a monkey might have done. Uttering a guttural cry of surprise and alarm, the witch man whirled with unbelieving speed, his rifle in his hands. And, handicapped as he was by his precarious position on the perpendicular cliff, the mad hermit's shot beat John Irons' by a breath.

The screaming slug grazed John Irons' skull, bringing blood to the Association man's eyes, barely sparing his life. Irons' bullet shattered the stock of the hermit's gun, and brought the witch man down himself, his long limbs beating the air.

The witch man struck hard at the bottom, and rolled to the water's edge. John Irons wiped the blood from his eyes, and

levered a fresh cartridge into its chamber. As he did so, the mad hermit spat out a mouthful of mud and sat up.

"I'd say, off-hand, stranger," Sudden John growled, "that it's yore turn to talk."

It came to the Association man later that he must have looked rather fearsome to his enemy there—disheveled and hatless, his clothes ripped and torn, his face black from the smoke dust, and his eyes red and bleared. At any rate, fear was etched deep on the hermit's ugly features as he stared up at his captor; fear and pain, and venomous, murderous hate.

At first the witch man seemed only partially conscious, but when John Irons repeated his warning to talk, the hermit's eyes darted to his gun, smashed and out of reach. He sagged visibly. Then he lifted his gaze and offered an astonishing mien of stupidity and cunning, of apology and insolence.

"I was only shootin' to scare you off," he lied. "You was on my ground. . . ."

John Irons let the flagrant lie pass. "*Yore* ground?"

The madman nodded, and a rattling chuckle of exultation came from his throat. "Demps Rudd is daid, an' Timmy Strombotany's neck is in the halter. An' they di'n't never prove up. This here is open groun'. An' my stake sets right a-there, 'side the burned cabin."

John Irons was too agitated for real anger. "Yo're a little previous on yore stakin'. Timmy ain't hung yet. An' you ain't on easy street, yore own self. Cast yore sun-burnt eyes on that!"

So saying, the Association man flashed the sheriff's badge wished off onto him the night before by Sam Strombotany. The witch man ogled it, and seemed to realize where he stood. For his rat face fell, and he gulped as if swallowing an exceedingly bitter pill, then groaned.

John Irons watched his prisoner's antics in growing uncertainty. He had forgotten Timmy Strombotany and the grim task facing him, in the excitement of the last half hour. But the mad hermit's words brought it all back forcibly to mind. For if the recluse had actually filed on the murder ranch, it might mean he'd had a hand in the killing of Demps Rudd.

Such a circumstance might explain the hermit's unprovoked attack on John Irons. Or he might be completely loco and lying or dreaming, or both. His attack might have been the result of nothing more than the sudden homicidal urge of a maniac.

The witch man abruptly ceased his dismal lamentation and John Irons looked long into the half-witted but strangely cunning face, attempting to evaluate and to judge him, and so to decide what his next step should be.

He could take the strange recluse into custody, and probably get him committed to the bug house. But while such a move would rid the country of the eccentric's objectionable presence, it would not save Timmy from hanging next morning. And John Irons could not shake the feeling that the madman was somehow implicated in the crime for which Timmy must die.

He couldn't think why this gaunt, otherworld creature would want the dismal homestead. But he did want the ground, unless he were lying about the filing. And if John Irons should let him go and keep track of his actions, the witch men might lead him to evidence which would justify a stay of execution for Timmy.

If the hermit actually were involved in the death of Demps Rudd, he would be scared now and on his guard, and John Irons life would be in danger every moment the madman remained at large. But the stakes were worth the gamble.

"Get up on yore laigs," he told the witch man gruffly, his decision made. "An' haul yore haunches out o' here—'fore I do what I ought, an' leave yu' here for the coyotes."

The witch man needed no urging. Uttering the same dry chuckle of exultation, he bounded to his feet before John Irons' words were out of his mouth, and without looking to right or left started down the canyon at a run, leaping from one side of the cut to the other to find the best footing, as agile as a mountain goat.

John Irons laboriously climbed up the bank opposite the cliff, to keep the madman in sight until he'd learned where the hermit had hidden his horse. But if the witch man had ridden a horse up the Widow's Wail, he was not stopping for it in his retreat. Still afoot, he was heading down country, toward Hardpan.

He had covered half a mile in the time it had taken John Irons to climb the cut-

bank, and was still running as if the devil were hard on his heels.

Irons understood then that the strange goat man had had no horse at all. And he understood how the hermit had followed him, without showing himself to John Irons' view. His huge paddle feet raised no dust, and by keeping to the low ground and ravines he could have kept Sudden John in sight from the moment the Association man had left Hardpan, without himself being seen.

The Association man cursed silently, then. The witch man had not been armed when he left the murder ranch. But he might have other weapons at his hideout cave. And he'd not be likely to miss his mark in another ambush, along the trail back to town.

Resolved to get his horse and to keep the demented hermit within sight on the ride back, John Irons slid back down the steep cutbank he'd climbed. But the numbness had gone from his head, admitting a dull throbbing pain, and before leaping the stream again, he squatted beside the water to bathe the hurting wound.

As he did so, something in the stream's gravelly bottom caught his eye, and he remained squatting, staring, all thought of his wound and the mad witch gone. Suddenly he reached down and brought up a pinch of black sand. In the midst of it there glittered a tiny yellow speck. And there arose in him the keenness and subdued excitement of a predator scenting a fresh-made trail.

For the tiny yellow flake was gold. Free gold. Dead man's gold!

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Gold

MINUTES passed while Sudden John sat motionless on his haunches, studying the shallow canyon formation out of narrowed, speculative eyes. Then, his enemy still forgotten, he climbed up out of the cut and walked to the burned-out cabin. There he picked up the iron skillet which had saved his life earlier, and a short search revealed a spoon-bit shovel, leaning against the corral fence.

The burned fry-pan he scoured with sand and gravel from the creekbed. Then he sank the shovel deep into the black sand where he'd found the tell-tale golden flake, and placed the sand in the skillet. Squatting on his haunches, he submerged the pan in the moving current until only a part of its brim was above the surface. Deftly then he gave the pan a circular jerk that sluiced the water through the sand and gravel. The larger and lighter objects worked to the surface, and spilled over the edge of the shallow pan.

Sand and gravel diminished rapidly as he continued the process. Soon nothing but the thinnest layer of sand remained in the pan, and his motions became more delicate, as the washing became finer. His eyes never left the gently swirling water, and at length nothing seemed to remain but the pan's own charred bottom.

It was then that the pan yielded its first color. One tiny yellow speck, such as he'd picked from the creekbed a few minutes before, stuck to the side of the pan, almost on the brim.

Encouraged by the find, he sent the water sluicing back to the other side of the pan, turning the minute sand grains remaining over and over along the skillet's bottom. And a second tiny fleck of yellow appeared.

His washing then became infinitely patient, his movements delicate and painstaking far beyond the requirements of regular placer mining. His eyes examined each grain of sand as it spilled from the pan. And when at last the pan was empty of gravel and sand, five golden flakes could be counted, lodged against its pitted sides.

Five colors, on the first pan!

Grunting in satisfaction, he moved a few feet downstream and repeated the process. This pan yielded three colors. The next pan, a similar distance down the creek, yielded only one. Three pans washed further down showed nothing at all.

Immensely satisfied, the Association man returned to the site of his first test pan, and worked upstream instead of down. There, the pans became progressively richer. At a point directly under the cliff where the mad hermit had fallen, fifty-five colors remained in the pan after

all the sand was gone. From this point, however, the richness of the washings declined again, as steadily as it had formerly increased. Finally, at a point hardly more than a hundred feet from the first paying pan downstream, the skillet yielded only two colors. Half a dozen pans beyond yielded only sand.

Pausing a moment from his work, John Irons glanced at the sun and was surprised to see it was already noon. He re-examined the creekbed and the canyon with a practiced, measuring eye. And a deep impelling thrill crept along his veins.

The occurrence of placer gold for a bare hundred feet along the bank of the tortuous Widow's Wail, in a salting so thin as to escape all but accidental discovery, might have no significance at all. It might, on the other hand, indicate the presence of a rich ore pocket, somewhere up the slope. A rich deposit of pure free gold, freed from its centuries-old rock prison by erosion of the surrounding stone, spilling fan-wise down the incline, toward the creek.

If there were such a pocket, he knew it couldn't be far removed from the creek. Not with the golden spillway a mere hundred feet across its lower edge.

Fired with a fever alien to his unhurrying nature, the Association man set about exploring that possibility. Moving back a few feet from the water, he started a second row of test holes, behind the first line.

The afternoon wore on, and the sun drew perspiration from his straining muscles as he worked, digging down until he struck the black, gold-bearing sand, carrying it to the water and panning with the same tireless patience.

The second line completed, he ran a third, almost in against the canyon wall, cross-cutting the creek's bank as he moved up from it, running each line as far as colors showed in the sand. The second line was shorter than the first, the third was shorter than the second. The sides of the golden fan were gradually coming together. They would meet somewhere up the slope, out of the canyon. At that point, the apex of the triangle, there would be a pocket—or at least a broken vein—of free gold. It might be small, or it might be richer than any man had ever dreamed of.

Nor was he guessing about that pocket. The test holes had become progressively richer as distance was increased from the creek. And the richest pans in each line had come from the holes in the center. These rich center holes formed a straight line, which pointed straight to the weathered cliff where the witch man had hidden. And although the ground sloped sharply up from the water to the cliff's base, the holes in the third line were scarcely deeper than those in the second row.

The flat, fan-shaped spill of gold-bearing sand was rising swiftly to its source. The pocket, wherever it was, would not be far beneath the surface.

Climbing again to the top of the cut-bank opposite the cliff, John Irons studied the pattern of the test holes, extending the sides of the inverted V in his mind's eye until they came together. He sighted and charted the triangle's apex from every possible angle. And each time his eyes came to rest almost exactly in the center of the burned cabin.

The implication of his latest find was both thrilling and disturbing. For even as he mentally charted the outline of the hidden triangle of gold, he was charting also the outline of the murder of Demps Rudd—as it might have happened.

The witch man might be crazy—like a fox. The hermit might have learned of the presence of gold on Widow's Wail. He might have killed Demps Rudd himself, and framed the blame on Timmy, so as to eliminate both the owners of the gold ranch. At least, he claimed to have filed on the place, without even waiting until Timmy was dead.

Gold would explain the hermit's wanting to possess that otherwise worthless homestead. It would explain his otherwise inexplicable attack on Sudden John Irons. . .

The hunch grew into conviction, and a slow, grim smile pulled at the Association man's mouth. But behind his speculative eyes other thoughts were at work. And as these thoughts came to the fore, his quiet smile thinned.

Timmy Strombotany, he was reminded, already had been convicted of the murder

of his partner. And discovery of gold on the ranch they both had homesteaded would be taken as additional proof of Timmy's guilt, not proof of his innocence.

John Irons had ridden to the homestead and had worked his muscles sore in the hope of uncovering evidence in Timmy's favor. Instead of supplying such evidence, he had merely sealed the one weak spot in the case against Timmy. He had introduced into the case a motive for murder which was much stronger than the one on which Timmy had been convicted.

John Irons' thin smile twisted ironically. And, like the hunter who followed a cougar till the track got too fresh, the Association man gave up his quest for gold. Glumly, he slid back into the shallow canyon, filled in his test holes and obliterated all sign of digging. Then he remounted his horse and headed back for town.

The day was almost gone, but he took a different route back, giving the wild man of Widow's Wail no opportunity for a second easy ambush. He swung wide of the creek-bank trail and rode the high ridges, his rifle resting on the pommel before him.

His eyes as he rode were clear and impersonal and alert as the eyes of a hawk. But his thoughts were for the sunrise, and Timmy Strombotany. And in his heart there was brooding black despair.

That despair, when he reached Hardpan just before sundown, was suddenly alloyed with alarm. For a crowd was gathering outside the jail. It was not sullen and ugly, as crowds are when bent on mischief. Rather, it was expectant and almost festive in its mood. But John Irons took no chances. He rode straight to the jail. And he carried his saddle gun inside with him.

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THE cheerless office looked just as it had the night before. The door into the jail was open, and the jail was already dark. The lamp was burning on the table beside the death cell, its single petal of flame as wan and pale as a taper at a death wake. The girl still sat in the rocker in the lamplight, a book open on her knees. And behind the desk in the office, Sam Strombotany bulked huge and sodden.

"Glad to see you made it, back," the old man rumbled, obviously relieved. "I was beginnin' to get worried. I". . . . his voice petered out, and he stared hard at John Irons through the gloom. "What happened out there? You look like you been hit with a wagon tongue!"

John Irons jerked a thumb noncommitally at the door. "What's the mob up to?"

The lawman shrugged. "It ain't a mob —yet. But I reckon it could be. Ira Shane's decided he needs a well dug, so's he won't have to serve crick water no more for chasers in his Hardpan bar. He's havin' the mad hermit witch it for 'im. An' the witch man allus draws a crowd."

"Witch man? Is he in town?"

Strombotany nodded. "An' he was up to somethin', somewhere, today. He hit town, 'long about noon, on the lope. Run up to the Hardpan Bar, an' Red Ira Shane let 'im in the back way. Now, when it comes out what the coyote was up to today, Ira will put twenty toughs on the stand to swear the hermit was in his bar, all day. An' the hermit will go free. It's allus that way."

"What," John Irons asked, interested, "is the hookup b'tween the hermit an' that red-headed saloonkeeper?"

Again Strombotany shrugged. "I ain't never figgered it out. But I reckon the hermit has helped Shane, in some o' Ira's swindle deals. Leastways, they're thicker'n thieves. Whenever there's a killin' points to the witch man, Red Ira swears the hermit was in his back room all day, passed out."

"Crooked deals? Like what?"

Strombotany spread his hands. "There's allus been talk o' gold in the Big Mungers. Ira's got a assay outfit, in the back o' his bar. He's worked a dozen or swindles since he's ben here. But the dirt farmers is onto him, now. They don't suck in."

John Irons' eyes glimmered at mention of gold, and it was on his tongue to relate the happenings of the afternoon out on Widow's Wail. But thought of Timmy's position changed his mind. Until Timmy was in the clear, he would not mention his discovery of gold on the homestead.

He had a sudden hankering to have a look at the crooked barman who dabbled in gold. And he didn't want to miss the witch man's show.

"Reckon I'll mosey out," he murmured, "an' watch this here well-witchin'. I ain't never seen a reg'lar witch man work at his trade."

The sheriff joined him, and together they found a point of vantage amid the growing crowd of men and women who lined the street. The road itself was deserted of all but the witch man. And the hermit seemed entirely unaware of his audience. Especially of Sudden John.

The madman looked not one whit different from when John Irons last had seen him, except he'd unslung the applewood fork from about his neck and was carrying it out-thrust before him—as if it were something which would bite. One hand gripped each of the two prongs, and the long main stem pointed straight ahead of him.

His yellow eyes were vacant and fixed, like the eyes of a spirit medium John Irons had seen once, in a seance. Up and down the road he walked, like a blind man searching for something he could not see. The crowd was hushed and alert and expectant. And even John Irons felt a strangle tingling at the base of his spine.

But the applewood wand in the witch man's hands behaved exactly as would any ordinary stick of firewood. And at length the hermit left the road and stepped onto a vacant lot adjoining the bar. At once the applewood wand began acting up. Its long tip quivered violently at first, like a willow in a strong wind. Then its point began to turn slowly toward the ground, as if attracted by some powerful, invisible force.

The witch man gripped tighter the forks in his hands, until his knuckles showed white. But the applewood wand seemed to defy his strength. Its point appeared to be attracted toward the ground as a compass needle is attracted by a strong magnet. And when the tip of the fork pointed straight at the earth, the madman paused and stood motionless. His eyes were rolled back into his head. His body was rigid and twitching. He frothed at the mouth, like a man in an epileptic fit.

For a long moment he stood thus, swaying back and forth on his heels. Then he bent forward and thrust the point of his wand deep into the ground.

"Dig here!" he commanded in a voice that gasped and croaked. And, with a kind of coughing grunt, he collapsed on the earth beside his wand, his muscles jerking.

A burly, red-haired man whom Strombotany identified as Red Ira Shane broke from the crowd, picked the witch man up gently, and carried him inside the bar.

"The mad witch man o' Widder's Wail!" Strombotany grunted, back inside the office. "I ain't never decided if he's actin' or if he throws a shore-enough fit. But one thing is shore. Everything, everybody, he touches, dies from the pizen. Just like Demps Rudd. Then somebody hangs. . . ."

The old man's words were bitter in his throat, and John Irons looked at him, narrowly. "You think he might of had a hand in that affair up on the crick?"

The old man looked away. "Couldn't say 'bout that. But he was hangin' around Demps, them last weeks. An' he knotted the rope aroun' Timmy's throat. Said he seen Timmy shoot Demps in the back o' the head, that night. Saw him throw the lamp on the floor, an' walk out to leave the place burn. Saw 'im take another drink, an' pass out there on the crick!"

The lawman's words were poison on his lips, and John Irons sensed he was close to something. Something big.

"What," he asked gently, "was the hermit doin' out there, to see it?"

"Demps had the hermit witch 'im a well up on the homestead. There was fever in the crick water, an' Timmy wanted a well 'fore he took Anne Deane out there to live. He arranged with Demps to sink it while he was away."

John Irons' blood leaped in his veins. His voice when he spoke was hoarse as a crow's. "Where did they sink that well?"

"In a harness room, a lean-to, joinin' the cabin. They wanted it inside, on account o' snow drifts. But they never did get it done. They struck bed-rock, down eight-ten feet. They filled the hole in again. . ."

John Irons heard no more. He was re-

calling how the fan-shaped placer spill had pointed, straight as a finger, at the cabin site. And he was suddenly as cold as ice.

"What the hermit hung around for, after that, I don't know. He might of had a hand in the killin'. But I reckon we won't never know. Others'll hang—but not the witch man!"

"There's a first time," John Irons said quietly, "for everything. An' with hangin', the first time is the last. We'll have a hearin' into Rudd's murder at sunrise in the mornin', on the scene of the killin'."

"Hearin'?" Strombotany blinked at him. "You can't hold a hearin' on that case. Timmy's tried, convicted, an' sentenced. You can't reopen the case without authority."

John Irons was checking the action of his pistols. "I'm actin' sheriff o' this county," he remarked softly. "I pack my own authority, an' it ain't never let me down yet. I say there'll be a hearin', at sun-up in the mornin', up by that burned cabin on Widow's Wail. The hangin' can wait till after. You can pass the word around, 'cause I want everybody there. Now I got a' errand to run."

Disappointment mingled with the surprise and protest on Big Sam's face. "Ain't you ever goin' back to see Timmy? He's ben askin' for you."

But John Irons shook his head doggedly. "I ain't going to talk to Timmy till mornin'. This-here hearin' ain't a-going to be rehearsed. I ain't only got you an' the dry farmers an' that travelin' judge to convince o' what I'm thinkin'. Sam, I still got to convince myself!"

CHAPTER FOUR

John Irons—Witch Man!

THE sun, rising over the snag-toothed Munger Mountains next morning, looked down on a strange and motely gathering around the burned cabin, on the Murder Ranch by the Widow's Wail.

John Irons was there, his new nickle badge polished bright as a new dime. Timmy Strombotany was there, handcuffed and in his father's custody. His face was drawn and pale, his eyes sullen and impersonal before the curious crowd.

Anne Deane was there, her face as pale as Timmy's. Her blue eyes were bleak with grief, and they never left Timmy's face. Her man was a condemned murderer and doomed to die. But she had fixed herself up for him, and a prettier, sadder face John Irons had never seen.

The witch man was there, his mad eyes blank and cunning by turns, and Red Ira Shane, armed and flanked by toughs from his Hardpan Bar. A sneer was on his florid face, and as the crowd grew restive with waiting for the promised excitement, Shane thrust himself boldly forward.

"I don't know what you got in your sleeve," he told John Irons bluntly, "but whatever it is, it better be good. I wired the judge in Sheridan this mornin' about this, an' a warrant for you is on its way down here. Contempt o' court, derelection o' dooty, an' obstruction o' justice is a few o' things you got to talk your way out of. There was to of been a hangin' today—"

"There will be a hangin'," John Irons promised. "But we'll make shore we're hangin' the guilty man, b'fore we lower the boom. An' now yo're out o' order. This is a hearin' to find out how Demps Rudd died out on his ranch, an' the farmers here will be the jury. You'll get yore chance to talk. But till yo're called on, you jus' look an' lissen."

John Irons was bluffing. He knew it, and Red Ira Shane knew it. John Irons was the one who was out of order. The crowd saw that, and grew more restless with waiting. And John Irons saw he'd have to hurry, or he'd have no chance to put into operation the plan he hoped would save Timmy from the rope.

"Timmy," he said loudly, to get the crowd's attention, "you was drunk the night you left Hardpan to ride out to this homestead. Where'd you get that likker?"

A shadow of surprise crossed the condemned youth's face. "I got it from Red Ira Shane. Anne wasn't home, an' I was tired an' feelin' low. I only stopped at the Hardpan for a drink. But Red Ira was feelin' good. He kept settin' 'em up. B'fore I knew it, I'd had too much—"

"An' all the while," John Irons broke in, "Shane was pourin' it on you about Anne ridin' out to see Demps. That right?"

Timmy stared at him, sullen and defiant. "You can leave Anne out of it," he snapped.

John Irons knew when to crowd a man, and when not to. He turned on the girl. "Was you out here to the cabin, the day Demps Rudd was killed?"

Color flooded the girl's face, and her stricken eyes appealed to Timmy. The youth snarled something and started for John Irons. But Big Sam caught his arm.

"Speak up, Annie," his heavy voice boomed. "Sudden John's your friend."

Anne Deane heeded the elephantine man. Her voice when she spoke was as clear and impersonal as cold rain. "Yes, I was here. Demps sent for me. He said to come out, and we'd fix the place up and surprise Timmy. He sent that—that *man!*"

She pointed a finger at the witch man as she spoke, and sight of the grinning hermit seemed for the first time to shake her courage and composure. She recoiled from him as if from a snake, and covered her eyes with her hands.

John Irons observed her narrowly, seeing that he had probed close to something monstrous and horrible, a memory of an experience, maybe. An experience which was somehow mixed up in the case against her Tim, and might shed light on the whole ugly affair.

He had no stomach for the task of going deeper into the thing which haunted her. But he was fighting for Timmy's life, and he continued to drive relentlessly at the thing he suspected and hoped was true.

"What happened while you was out here?"

Anne Deane's hands were still before her eyes, and she said nothing. She seemed to freeze and to grow smaller inside her tight bodice.

"Speak up, Anne," Sam Strombotany boomed. "Don't you be a-feared."

Once more the girl heeded the man whose son was her sweetheart. Bracing herself visibly, she lowered her hands and presented John Irons a face as small and white and pinched as a crushed white rose. John Irons didn't dare look at Timmy.

"Demps had been drinking when I got here," she said finally, in a low voice. "He was vague about what he wanted of me, and he didn't act natural. I became frightened, and started to leave. He coaxed me to stay, until Timmy came out. I wouldn't, and he took hold of me. . . ."

"I—I fought him. I called to the hermit for help, but he only sat and grinned. I scratched Demps and bit his hands. He tore my dress, and knocked me down. . ."

The girl shuddered, and her voice gave out. The dry farmers glared accusingly at John Irons.

Only Red Ira Shane and the mad hermit were unaffected by the tale. Ira Shane stood on widespread feet, flicking the tip of his quirt impatiently against his boots, scorn and skepticism on his handsome red face. The witch man sat cross-legged and complacent, leering and grinning at nothing.

"There was an ax on the floor where I fell," the girl went on. "I picked it up. Demps backed away from me, looking scared. He started to apologize, but I went on out. I rode home."

"You meet Timmy on the way?"

The girl shook her head. "The next time I saw Timmy, he was in jail."

"Did you tell what you just told at Timmy's trial?"

Again the girl shook her head. "Timmy didn't want me to tell it. Anyway, it would only have made things look worse for him."

John Irons agreed. It did indeed make things blacker for Timmy. But the Association man refused doggedly to be deterred from the trail he had taken. He turned next to the registrar of the Hardpan land office, a small bald man whom he had interviewed the night before.

"Did anybody file on this homestead?" he asked, "after Demps Rudd was killed an' Timmy was in jail?"

THE registrar understood the importance of his testimony. He glanced uneasily at the witch man.

"The day after Timmy was sentenced for murder, the hermit come into the office an' filed on this God-forsaken quarter section. Demps' and Timmy's filin' hadn't been proved up, an' with both of 'em out o' the picture, I didn't see nothin' to prevent the witch man takin' over. I entered his claim on the books. But if

Timmy's proved innocent o' that charge an' turned loose again, why o' course the hermit's claim won't stand?"

"Timmy proved innocent?" Red Ira Shane roared, in outraged anger. "So that's the way the wind's blowin'! You're tryin' to put the hermit again' the blaze, for a crime Tim Strombotany's already been sentenced for. It don't hold up!"

"The witch man admits he was out here when the murder was done," John Irons broke in. "An' he filed on the quarter section, 'fore Demps had got cold. . . . It might hold up, at that, Shane."

The crowd murmured its doubt, and Red Ira Shane put that skepticism into words. "A man would have to be crazier'n the witch man to kill somebody, just to git hold of a worthless piece o' ground like this 'un. So it *don't* hold up. . . ."

John Irons grunted. "Worthless, maybe, Shane. An' crazy, maybe. But I got a hunch that hermit o' yor'n is crazy like a fox. I got a hunch a man could witch this homestead proper, an' dig up somethin' yellower'n that coyote's eyes. An' I'm about to try!"

Turning his back then with studied indifference, the Association man walked down to the creek bank, found a scrub serviceberry bush, and cut from it a willow which forked into two equal branches. Leisurely, he whittled the main stem and the branches down until what had been a forked willow now resembled a boy's flipper handles. This done, he walked back to the cabin.

"They hung gram'ma for a witch, back in Salem," he told the crowd gravely, "an' gram'pa allus said I'd come to a bad end. But I expect there's more to this murder ranch than meets the eye, an' the hermit ain't the only one who's got somethin' on the devil. So—"

Gripping one branch of his forked serviceberry wand in either hand, as he'd seen the hermit do, he pointed its tip straight before him and stepped gingerly about through the cabin ashes. A depression in the ground marked where the well had been opened and filled back in, inside the cabin lean-to. And as he approached the spot, he pretended to fight the serviceberry wand to keep its point out before him, while actually letting it lower.

Directly over the fill, he permitted the tip to point straight down. And, bending swiftly, he thrust the willow fork deeply into the yielding earth.

"I ain't been at this long," he said. "I can't throw no fit. But I reckon others here will take care o' the paroxysms, directly. Dig here!"

★

HE POINTED at four shovels and picks he had carried from Hardpan that morning. But no man offered to use them. The dirt farmers watched uncertainly, eyes skeptical, wondering and half fearful. The hermit stared.

But Red Ira Shane hunched forward, his eyes cold and challenging. "You're still bluffin', John Irons. Anybody with eyes can see you planted that stick where the hermit already witched a well. The well him an' Demps filled back in."

John Irons nodded readily. "That's right, Ira. But the hermit was witchin' for water. I'm witchin' for the reason Demps Rudd was murdered. Dammit, *dig here!"*

His second command, spoken in a voice which cracked in the silence like a bull whip, brought four dirt farmers to the spot.

The hermit crawled furtively to the wand, and examined it, wonderingly. "It's off'n a serviceberry bush," the madman muttered, turning the stick over and over in his hands. "An' serviceberry's fruit, same as apple. He's got the gift."

They gathered around the diggers, watching each shovel of dirt as it was turned up, as if expecting to find a skeleton or something stranger in every shovelful.

John Irons stood back from the crowd, keeping the hermit and Red Ira Shane in view. He had risked all on the turn of a single throw of the dice. And he saw he had gambled recklessly. For if his calculations were wrong and the diggers uncovered nothing, Timmy would not only hang, as scheduled, but John Irons himself would face grave charges.

He knew, however, that his own case would never come to trial. Red Ira Shane would never let him take the stand. The saloonman had brought his gun-hands along just for that purpose.

AN EXCLAMATION from one of the diggers carried John Irons to the deepening pit in one long leap. The man who had yelled was holding up a small piece of broken rock. He handed it to a bystander as John Irons came up, and a low murmur ran through the crowd as the rock was passed from hand to hand. And John Irons' blood leaped in his veins. For his gamble had paid off!

That small ragged chunk of shattered rock was rotten quartz!

The diggers attacked the rock at their feet with renewed vigor.

John Irons eyes caught a gleam of yellow in the growing pile of rubble beside the hole. Stooping, he picked up a chunk of quartz the size of his fist and rubbed the clinging dirt away, as one of the farmers might have rubbed the earth from a carrot turned up by a hand plow. In a moment, he saw the object was only part rock. The rest of it was pure gold!

He couldn't choke back an exclamation, and the crowd echoed the sound. The digging had stopped. The dirt farmers had discarded picks and shovels, and were squatting in the shallow hole, holding bits of rock up to the light.

It was a bonanza, a treasure hole! In the pit, the quartz had decayed away from the formation until there was more gold than rock. There were chunks of it with no rock at all attached, where the picks had laid open the very heart of the vein.

The crowd stood transfixed, refusing to believe. Yet there it was, before their eyes. Finally, one of them—a leathery, near-sighted old timer with a wen on his large nose—knelt on all fours beside the excavation and peered intently at the exposed vein. His nostrils flared, his chin whiskers stood straight out.

"Why, damn these old eyes!" he exclaimed in wonder. "I've heard tell o' the mother lode. But I never 'spected I'd see it. Why, that's all the gold they *is!*"

The mad hermit bolted suddenly, on hands and knees, like a great cockroach, fleeing light. But Sam Strombotany caught him by the hair and pulled him back into a sitting position.

John Irons, however, wasn't watching the witch man. He was watching Red Ira Shane and his henchmen. And he was watching for trouble.

The crowd was suddenly uneasy, too. It had not kept up with developments, but everyone knew the strange drama they had witnessed that day was fast approaching a climax. They understood that Red Ira Shane and the witch man and the fabulously rich gold vein on the murder ranch were mixed up somehow in the death of Demps Rudd and the condemning of Timmy Strombotany.

They knew that the lank lawman who had appeared out of nowhere to take over the running of their county had something up his sleeve. They knew he was known widely as the Devil's Ramrod, and they'd seen him locate the richest gold pocket in the Territory with an ordinary forked stick, cut from a serviceberry bush. And some swore later that the Devil himself stood behind John Irons that day on the Widow's Wail, egging him on.

Others said it was the mad witch man whom the Devil sided in those long last minutes, and still others remarked slyly that it was Red Ira Shane who showed the cloven hoof before the thing was over. But those who weren't looking for devils saw the old timer with the goat's beard pick up the serviceberry fork from where the witch man had dropped it, and slide it furtively under his ancient coat.

They saw Timmy Strombotany stare wide-eyed and bewildered from the gold to John Irons and back at the gold. They saw Anne Deane ignore the gold to look at her man. And they saw Red Ira Shane back away from the diggings, into the ranks of his henchmen. They saw him watch with narrowed, glinting eyes the longgeared stranger who witched gold wells as others witched water holes.

"This here sets me back on my heels," they heard Shane admit. "But it don't mean much. It only means you've found gold—on the hermit's land."

"It means," they heard John Irons reply, "that I'm lowerin' the boom on you, Shane. It means yore hand is up!"

"*My* hand?" Ira Shane's face was blank. "You can't drag me inta this—"

"I ain't draggin' you in," John Irons told him, his voice menacing in the very softness of its drawl. "I'm draggin' you out, with a rope around yore neck. You've

had this ornery coyote of a hermit under yore wing a long time. He told you when him an' Demps struck gold, a-diggin' that well. You rode out an' offered Demps a cut in yore bizness, if he'd use Timmy up, an' cut you inta his mine."

The big red barman tried to interrupt with a denial. But his eyes told John Irons his own deductions were correct, and the Association man went on:

"It was yore idee, gettin' Anne Deane to ride out here, the day Timmy was looked for back. It was yore idee Demps mistreatin' her, so's Timmy would jump Demps when he heard about it, an' be killed. You got Timmy drunk, when he hit town, an' filled him full o' pizen about Demps an' Anne, to help things on.

"But you didn't never aim to split with Demps. You aimed to get it all, Shane. You framed Demps ahead o' Timmy. You meant it was Demps that would die out here, an' you was buildin' a case to hang Timmy, so's they both would be out o' the pitcher, an' the mine would be yore's.

"You had the hermit planted outside the cabin, the night Timmy rode out here. Demps picked a scrap, like you'd put 'im up to. An' when Demps had knocked Timmy out, yore witch man shot Demps in the back o' the head, through the window. The witch man drug Timmy out to the crick an' poured whiskey over him, then set fire to the cabin, with Demps inside. An' all the while you was in town, buildin' up yore case by warnin' Sam what Timmy was going to do with Demps, for buttin' in where Timmy's girl was concerned."

The saloonman's eyes were nervous and bright. But for the benefit of the crowd, he sneered again, and laughed.

"It's a good story, John. But you're just guessin'. Timmy's been sentenced for that crime. An' you got no evidence, again, me nor the hermit."

IT WAS the moment John Irons had been working up to from the first. He'd seen it coming, and he had no answer to the barman's allegation. Because Red Ira was right.

He didn't have any evidence, but he knew inside him the barman was guilty, and it would be a matter of his wits against those of Red Ira. He had been confident he could trip the other up. And that confidence had not left him.

"You played it close an' careful, Shane," he said, playing it low and careful himself. "You used the witch man to do the killin', so's you'd be in the clear if yore scheme backfired, an' the hermit would get the rope. But I reckon you was still playin' whole hawg or none.

"I reckon you didn't aim to split with the witch man, neither. You aimed to kill him, to shut his mouth, quick as Timmy was dead an' the homestead was the witch man's. I expect if we looked through yore papers, we'd find one where the hermit signed his estate over to you. I 'spect he signed it, without knowin' what he was puttin' his name to."

It was a good hunch. And the break came before the Association man had looked for it. At mention of papers, the demented hermit ceased his incoherent mumbling. And suddenly he was on his feet.

His whiskered, ash-gray face was twisted into a diabolic mask, his eyes glowing like unholy fires. One hand clawed a long-bladed knife from under his clothes.

Hissing and spitting like a giant cat, he advanced on the barman slowly. John Irons caught: "Papers I signed. . . . my gold. . . . Rob me!"

But the witch man said no more. For, before John Irons could interfere, the barman had drawn a gun and fired, point-blank. It was a hurried shot, striking the hermit in the leg. But the madman staggered and fell forward. As he did so, the applewood wand on the cord around his neck swung out beneath him, like a pendulum. He fell upon it, fully, driving its pointed tip into the rocky ground. And his dead weight broke off the two jutting forks, and drove the jagged end left deep into his chest.

For a moment, the witch man writhed and twisted like a snake impaled on a thorn. Then his muscles jerked as they had in the fit, and finally he lay quiet, blood spreading on the grass beneath him.

Some told it later that there were horns on John Irons' own head as he stood there above the dying witch man, staring down.

"That'll do for him!" Red Ira Shane

(Please turn to page 127)

Steve shot just once. . . .

Tomorrow I'll Fight Again!

CHAPTER ONE

Gunmen Wanted!

ALTHOUGH the wedding ceremony was over, the soft glow of light flowing from Steve Lassiter's Lazy L ranch house still showed on the saddled horses, buggies and buckboards in the ranch yard. Inside the house, violin music mingled with women's gay laughter as the three-piece orchestra reeled off a lively square dance.

Justine Bell, Steve Lassiter's new bride, was especially beautiful tonight; her eyes blue as the Texas sky, her hair like the golden light that slipped down each evening over Geronimo Peak from the dying sun. One arm was through that of her husband, the other linked with that of her husband's best friend, Ramsey McKay, whose smile was as broad as that of Steve Lassiter's.

He had been Steve's pardner for as long as anyone could remember; more like brothers, cow-folks around Geronimo said. Any day in the week, Ramsey would gladly lay down his life for Steve. And Steve would do the same for Ramsey.

Gradually the crowd thinned. The wag-

By John G. Pearsol

Ramsey McKay put a blood-money bounty on Steve Lassiter's head, yet when that desperate cowman was at McKay's mercy, why should he perform the operation that might save Steve's life—and win for himself ruin and death?

Ramsey McKay

Novel of Feuding Ranchers

ons and buggies rolled away into the darkness, and saddle leather creaked as voices called best wishes. Steve Lassiter and his bride stood in the doorway of their home beside Ramsey McKay and waved and laughed happily.

Then Ramsey McKay laughed and slapped Steve on the shoulder. "Steve, you lucky dog!" he said and smiled at Justine, her blue eyes starry with happiness. He reached inside the door and got his big, white hat. He held it in his hand, his gaze lingering on Justine. He said, "I reckon I'll be going. But I haven't kissed th' bride."

Steve Lassiter assured him, "Well, that's one thing Ramsey McKay can sure do!"

The laughter was still in Justine's eyes as Ramsey reached out and held her chin in his cupped hand while he kissed her lips. He was still smiling as he stepped back and put his black, concha-trimmed Stetson rakishly on his head.

He said, "So long—and good luck!"

As he rode away, he raised his hand and touched his lips where Justine's had touched his, wondering if anyone could have noticed that the smiling, good-natured Ramsey McKay had suddenly come to hate Steve Lassiter more than anything on earth. He wondered, too, if anybody had noticed that he was in love with Justine Lassiter.

For a moment, out in the darkness, McKay stopped his horse and looked back. They were there, silhouetted in the doorway, staring at each other. They did not look out after him; Ramsey called, "Adios," then saw Steve put an arm about his bride and close the door. . . .

★

AS DAYS passed and Ramsey McKay did not come to call on the Lassiters, Steve wondered at it, but suspected nothing unusual. For one thing, he was too busy.

On Steve Lassiter's range, the hills rode up high and rugged to the base of the mountains where the Geronimo Peaks thrust their heads into the sky. Steve had never needed many men to take care of his cattle, because they wouldn't leave the grass of his range for the barren hills to the south.

Steve had three men working for him; John Ringo, Tex Taggart, Beau Dennis. They were good men, but they were lax, just as Steve had been lax. At round-up, Steve took his men and headed out across the hills. He began to frown as he rode along. There were no cattle where there should have been plenty of stock.

For two days they combed the range. They found perhaps a few hundred head —a handful. The others were gone as though the earth had opened up and swallowed them. No tracks. No trail. No trace.

Steve Lassiter sat his jaded horse, weariness in the line of him, looking at a range that was to have been his fortune, but now seemed to be his ruin.

His man, Tex Taggart, exclaimed, "Buck Todd, by God! When we built that dam to give us water he swore he'd break you for it. He said it left him dry."

"He lied," Steve stated, "He knows that now. He gets just as much water as I do."

Taggart argued, "But he ain't forgot that you slapped his mouth and took his gun away from him when he called you a water-grabbin' hog."

Steve Lassiter nodded. "We'll just take a look-see at Buck Todd!"

As they rode toward Todd's place, Steve swore, for he could see now the broad cattle tracks leading ahead. Tex Taggart leaped from his horse, examined a strand of wire fence where the tracks went through it.

"Cut," he declared.

They followed the tracks till they became lost in a maze of others on Todd's range. Then he stopped as he heard no sound of hoofs behind him. Turning in his saddle, he eyed Tex Taggart, Beau Dennis and John Ringo with questioning eyes.

Beau Dennis shook his head. He said, "We ain't drawin' fightin' pay, Steve. Buck Todd's got a lot of fast gun-hands workin' for him. There'll be a fight, sure as hell!"

Steve snapped, "Okay, I'll pay fightin' wages. Starting now!"

"A few dollars in your pocket won't take a bullet out of your belly," Beau Dennis answered flatly.

Steve Lassiter said, "Go back and tell Missus Lassiter to pay you off!"

He whirled his horse hard and thundered his way across the hills to Buck Todd's place.

Todd was on the porch, and three men were hunkered down beside the saddle shed. Buck Todd, a grizzled old warrior, kept his rocking chair in motion even after Steve pulled to a dust-stirring halt and regarded him with flinty eyes.

He asked sarcastically, "You couldn't guess, I suppose, what just happened to me?"

"You fell off yore rockin' horse, mebby?"

The lines of bitterness in Steve's face deepened. He replied, "I just took a long ride, all over my range. I don't have any cows."

Buck Todd sneered, "Fine! Now mebby you'll leave th' country an' let decent ranchers alone."

His patience thin, Steve went on, "I tracked my cows to your fence. I saw where th' fence was cut. I tracked 'em on into your land till their tracks got all mixed up with your cows. That calls for a lot of explaining, Buck."

Todd got up very slowly and stood with his long arms hanging limply down at his sides. Finally he admitted, "Yeah. Yeah, that seems to call for somethin', don't it? But now I'll tell you what I think. I think you're a damn liar! You never lost any cows. You never seen no tracks. You never seen a cut fence, onless you cut it yourself. Now what you gonna do about that?"

Steve let out a long breath. Coldly and positively he stated, "What I'm gonna do about it is to shoot you square in th' belly!"

He whipped a hand back, his rage so intense he forgot he was taking a chance on the men by the bunkhouse. They went into action just about as fast as old Buck Todd yanked his gun. Steve Lassiter's first shot knocked a leg from under Todd, who fell down and drew a steady bead on Steve.

One of the men by the bunkhouse threw a quick shot that raked Steve's side. It twisted him about so sharply that Buck Todd's bullet only tugged at his shirt. His horse jumped as a bullet burned its rump and its forefoot kicked the gun out of Steve's hand. He lay there unarmed.

Buck Todd yelled, "Hold it!"

Todd limped over to Steve and leveled his gun at him. He snapped, "Git on that nag you call a horse and git off my land! Th' next time I won't stop 'em!"

Steve got up, thrust his gun in his hol-

ster. He stated flatly, "I still say you're a damn rustler. I'm going to get my cows back or shoot every B-T rider I lay eyes on. If that calls for more gun-play, let's start now and do it all over again!"

Buck Todd motioned with his cocked gun. He barked, "You got guts, but that's all. Git!"

Steve got, his wound forgotten. He rode around his ranch to talk to Ramsey McKay before he went home. Ramsey was fixing a saddle. He grinned and waved, then saw the blood on Steve's shirt.

"Hey! What's this?"

Steve told him about Todd. His eyes thoughtful, Ramsey admitted, "I've lost cattle too. But not as many as you. I raised hell with my men and they quit. Mebby I cussed 'em too hard," he smiled ruefully. "But I hired some new men."

McKay motioned and three men came over from the porch. He introduced them to Steve as Phil Galen, Bat Morgan, and Pancho Perez. Steve didn't like the looks of them, but a man couldn't be particular when rustlers were on the loose.

Ramsey offered, "Since you lost your men I'll loan you Pancho. He's a good tracker. Good with a gun too, just in case."

Steve said, "Thanks. Okay, Pancho?"

Pancho grinned, saying, "*Si, seguro.* What I care? Me, I don't care if I shoot thee rustler for you, or shoot heem for somebody else."

"If I'd had you along this morning it'd been a different story when I met Buck Todd," Steve opined.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble at the B-T

STEVE LASSITER was in a tighter spot than he had let on to either his wife or to Ramsey McKay. When Justine frowned, and worry shadowed her pretty eyes, he said lightly, "A few cows more or less doesn't mean a thing. We'll clear it up in no time. Even if I don't get 'em back, I'll never miss 'em."

He kissed her, realizing that for her, and her only, was he concerned about the cattle. The thought of her having to work, to wash and scrub and cook and bake, was abhorrent to him. She might have to do those things if he didn't get his cattle back.

He rode into Geronimo and stopped at the bank. Nelson, the banker, listened as he told of his missing cattle. Then Nelson said, "Money's tight. I gambled with you when I gave you enough to build that dam. You showed me that it'd pay because it would grow more grass to feed more cattle. But this coppers that bet, Steve. Water's no good if there's no cattle to drink it. I'll have to have my money or foreclose on the land."

Steve drummed on the scarred desk top. He asked, "When?"

Nelson said, "When it's due—month after next."

Steve's spurs clinked as he strode out into the street. Month after next. . . . Month after next, unless a miracle happened he'd be a beggar. Justine would discover that she'd married a tramp. He wouldn't have a nickel, and Justine would say she'd go to work while he got a job on a ranch to get another start.

Steve Lassiter cursed feelingly. He arrived home at dusk. He laughed and said, "Sure, everything's fine," when Justine asked him if he tended to everything in town.

He ate his supper, then talked to Pancho Perez. Somehow, now that he had a good look at Pancho, he was glad he had him. He looked like a cold-blooded little devil, and that was the kind of fellow Lassiter needed. Month after next wasn't very far away.

Steve said, "Pancho, we got a lot to do. I'm in a fix. I don't tell th' Missus, but I'm just about ready to fold up. So we have to work fast. If I can pin th' deadwood on Buck Todd I can get a court to grant me damages from his estate. That's all I can hope for. We have to do it. You take th' south end of th' range. I'll take th' north. If you see anybody driving my cattle off my range, stop 'em."

Pancho nodded. Steve said, very soberly, "I mean, stop 'em, Pancho. Kill 'em dead as hell!"

Pancho purred, "They weel be dead, señor. Do not worry."

Steve put a rifle in a boot on his saddle, and that night he patrolled the north end of his range, keeping in the dark and watching the sky-line. But nothing hap-

pened. The next night was the same. The following day he rode over his range and knew that more cattle were gone. Nearly all of them now.

That puzzled him. There were two ways to get cattle out, one at the north, one at the south. As Pancho said none had gone south, he was either a liar or the cows had taken wings!

At McKay's ranch, Ramsey listened to him, then said, "Mebby Pancho's crooked, Steve. I wouldn't swear he wasn't. But if Todd's behind your rustling then Pancho isn't, because Pancho didn't come here till after it started. He's never been near Todd that I know of."

Steve said, "Don't mention it to him. But from now on I'll watch him."

Steve lay behind a rise and watched Pancho all that night. Nobody came near him. Nobody came near him for a week. Ramsey McKay came over and asked how things were going.

Steve told him, "I guess I was mistaken about Pancho."

Ramsey said, "It's funny. If I can do anything more, let me know, Steve."

Steve said, "Sure, Sure, Ramsey." But nobody could do anything, unless they could prove who rustled Steve's cattle.

Justine wasn't blind. She cornered Steve and said quietly, "You owe it to me, Steve. Tell me."

He did, and she smiled. She said what he expected her to say: "What if we do go broke? A lot of people have gone broke. We'll just start over." She said it as though she wouldn't mind a bit.

Desperation in him, Steve shook his head. "You don't understand," he told her. "It'd mean work; hard, slave-driving work. There'd be blisters on your hands, and you'd never be rested. I know. I went through it once. I don't want it again. Not for myself, and God knows I don't want it for you."

For a long time she regarded his troubled eyes. Then she smiled, and she said, "It might be fun to see if we're good enough to take it."

She kissed him and went into the house. Steve got a horse and headed north. Fun? Good God! Work twenty hours a day! Hands that were soft and smooth and lovely, to be hardened and roughened. A brow that was smooth and white to be wrinkled with worry and doubt. Eyes that laughed to be clouded and lacking their laughter and sparkle. . . . Not if, as a last resort, he had to walk up and shoot Buck Todd down in his tracks and cart him, dead as Adam, over to a frame-up plant, so a court would award the cattle back to him!

The night was still. Off to the south the coyotes yapped, the sound carrying far. Suddenly they stopped, and the abrupt stillness carried a suggestion of evil to Steve. He sat his horse waiting for them to start again. But they did not.

Steve jogged slowly southward. The stillness was broken by the faint, distant bawl of cattle; cattle disturbed, driven at night! He came to a ridge that let him look far. There they were; a long line of cattle, the dust kicked up by their dragging hoofs a golden haze in the moonlight. Behind them were three riders. Steve looked for Pancho. He was not at his usual place.

The cattle were gone over the rise when Steve came to the flats. He stopped as he saw a rider come toward him. It was Pancho.

Pancho said nothing for a moment, his eyes watching Steve, his ears evidently tuned to the fading sound of the driven cattle. Then he said, "I went over west. I hear sometheeng. I come back. Now I hear sometheeng again. It is bad."

Steve growled, "They're headed for Todd's range. We'll follow 'em. After they cut th' wire and drive 'em through, we'll have to stop 'em, Pancho. That'll be our proof."

Pancho's white teeth showed as he grinned. He said, very deliberately, "We weel stop heem."

Pancho beside him, Steve rode along, his rifle in his hand. His eyes straining through the darkness, he watched to see the cattle as they crossed the line from his own ranch to Buck Todd's. But they were going fast now. Steve motioned to Pancho, yelled, "Come on! After 'em! They've gone through!"

Pancho galloped up beside Steve. He was grinning again, his teeth shining. Something made Steve Lassiter watch him. Pancho yanked his gun and leveled it at Steve. Swinging sidewise out of his saddle, Steve let himself tumble hard

onto the ground as the Mexican fired.

Pancho circled. Steve rolled over and lined the rifle sights on the speeding Pancho who was galloping his horse in a wide circle, wary, watching to see if Steve was dead.

Steve fired. Pancho wavered but he clung to the saddle. He managed to get his horse straightened out, and headed south in the direction the cattle were traveling, and vanished from sight, wabbling as he rode.

Cursing, Steve arose. Pancho tried to kill him tonight because now, for the first time, Steve Lassiter was near the truth. And Buck Todd didn't want a fight, either with guns or in a court. That was it!

Steve got his horse, rode on. If he could beat Buck Todd to where he was taking the cattle he could make the grade, get his cattle, collect damages, save Justine, his home, his ranch. . . .

Like a bat out of hell, Steve Lassiter rode southward, cutting in a semi-circle. He knew where Todd would have to drive the cattle.

Finally, when he came to a narrow defile he stopped, his smile wicked as he listened to the sound of the approaching cattle.

He checked the loads of his rifle and edged to one side to let the cattle pass, waiting for the riders he knew would follow. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Hell in the Canyon

WHEN he saw them, he threw his rifle up, trying to line the sights on the dark, uncertain figure. He shot, but the rider raced on, unhit. The cattle began to run, hoofs thundering loudly in the narrow pass. A voice yelled, "Bat! Phil! Pancho! This way!"

On the verge of a second shot, Steve froze. That voice was Ramsey McKay's!

The cattle were milling, so that the three riders at the other end of the pass were having a hard time to keep their mounts from being smothered in the press of bodies.

Steve Lassiter sat there for a long, time, watching, listening, thinking. So it was Ramsey—and not Buck Todd—who was the thief! Ramsey had shaken Steve's hand and slapped him on the back and kissed his wife, and all the time he'd planned his ruin. That was why he'd hired new men, because he wanted gunmen who would rustle cattle for him. That was why Pancho tried to kill him; why Ramsey had offered him Pancho; and why Pancho had never been able to see where any of the cattle had gone!

What a damned fool he, Steve, had been! What a stupid, thick-headed fool!

In the red rage that burned his brain, he forgot that he was outnumbered three to one. All he could think of was that Ramsey McKay, the one man on earth that he trusted, had betrayed him and robbed him!

Steve Lassiter could not distinguish one rider from another in the misty moonlight, but he rode forward shooting, yelling every taunting challenge he could call to mind to make McKay fight.

Bullets began to snarl unheeded about him. He shot his rifle till it was empty then slammed it down and yanked a pistol. He hit nothing for he could see little, but he forced them back with the sheer ferocity of his charge. He shouted to McKay to come closer, as Ramsey and his riders shielded themselves behind the rocks, working their way out of the pass.

They cut a big circle and entered the pass again, and Steve knew what Ramsey was up to. Ramsey had to get the cattle down across the Border so it could not be proved that he was a rustler. He left a gunman behind a rock to hold Steve back while he drove the herd on. Steve heard the hoofs thundering through the pass again, and he charged forward, but was met by a hail of lead that dropped his horse dead in its tracks.

Steve lay behind it, watching, more cautious now. His hate-fevered brain was cooling and the sagacity of a gun-fighter was returning. A dead hero was no good. He had to live to prove Ramsey was a thief.

Every once in a while the gent behind the rock at the mouth of the pass would send a bullet close to Steve, and Steve inched his body slowly away from the horse, hugging the ground. Finally he could see the hidden gunman. Then he

rose up, said, "Look around this way, you dirty son! I've got a bullet for you!"

Steve laughed as he shot, and the gunman crumpled. He stepped forward cautiously, stopping and peering down at the still form of Bat Morgan, one of the men Ramsey had introduced him to.

Bat was dying. He cursed Steve as Steve stared at him with hard, uncaring eyes. He gasped, "You damn' fool. . . . You been played for a—sucker. Ramsey's gonna—steal yore wife. He's gonna. . . ."

Then Bat Morgan died.

Steve kept on staring at him. So Justine was the reason! He should have known! Slowly, Steve moved back and got Bat Morgan's horse. He rode down the pass in the wake of the cattle, watching for another bushwhacker.

As he came close to the herd, he heard the cries of the men urging the cattle on. Abruptly, a lance of flame leaped out at him. His right leg was suddenly numb, then he felt the hot agony of the pain coming into it as the bullet-shock wore off.

Steve pushed his horse over into the brush. Bullets still searched for him, cracking through the mesquite, singing off the rocks, screaming off into space. Steve sat very still. The fire lances came from one spot. Ramsey had done the same thing over again. Ramsey was scared. He'd left another man behind to stop Steve.

The rumble of the cattle's hoofs grew fainter. In an interval of silence Steve called, "That you, Pancho?"

There was no answer. Steve called, "Or mebby it's Galen. Either way, what's th' idea of risking your life for a dirty skunk like Ramsey McKay. He lets you stay behind while he gets away. Come on out. Give me your gun and I'll let you ride north."

Derisive laughter answered him. Phil Galen's voice called, "There's a big price on your head, Lassiter. He didn't ask anybody to stay here to get you. He just offered a big price for your scalp. I'm gonna get it!"

Steve threw a shot in the direction of the voice, but there was neither sound nor movement. Steve dismounted, tied the horse to a brush clump, then slapped its rump to make it jump. It rustled the brush and Steve jumped away in the opposite direction, watching the other side of the valley.

A gun flamed as the brush rattled, and Steve shot. There was a curse. Steve smiled. He taunted, "That one nipped you, Galen! You better come out and ride away while you can!"

Galen's gun yammered defiance. A bullet broke a twig in front of Steve's face, and the sound of the running cattle was gone now. Steve knew he had to hurry to stop McKay in time.

★

HE LEFT his horse, crawled on along the side of the valley. It was risky business, but finally he was far enough down so he could cross and not be seen. Then he started back on Galen's side. He heard Galen shoot every once in a while. He smiled, keeping flat on his face, inching slowly along with his six-shooter gripped tightly.

Then he saw Galen, standing behind a brush clump, staring across the valley where he'd last heard Steve. Steve rose up and started to raise his gun to shoot Galen in the back, then lowered it to his side and said very coldly, "I don't know why I shouldn't shoot you in the back. But somehow I can't. Turn around, dammit!"

Galen was cagey. He dropped like he'd been shot. His gun began to snarl, but he was shooting at something he had not yet seen. And Steve was shooting at something he could see very plainly. He shot just once, and Phil Galen settled down close to the ground in a limp heap and lay very still.

Steve limped across the valley floor, got his horse and spurred until ahead he heard the cattle again. As the sound came to him again his face grew grim. This time he could not afford to wait if Ramsey threw another man back to delay him. Pancho, it would have to be now, and Pancho was wounded. But Pancho would be harder to kill than either of the others. That little Mex would have tricks up his sleeve that the others would never think of.

Steve pushed his horse fast, gaining on the sound ahead of him. Then a bullet whispered past his ear, warning him that

death was close beside him. But he charged forward, seeing Pancho's crouched figure beside a rock, his gun leveled. Pancho's gun flamed, and Steve Lassiter's horse stumbled. Steve was catapulted head over heels, but he clung to his gun, landed loosely and rolled to one side as more shots threw sand geysers up where he had been.

He stopped rolling, his sights steady on Pancho. The hammer fell and Pancho screamed as his right arm dangled helplessly at his side. Pancho leaped on his horse and Steve's next shot missed while Pancho raced away.

Steve's horse was scrambling to its feet. He found a bullet scrape that had made his mount miss its footing, and rode on, satisfied that Pancho was out of the running. His arm was busted all to hell. Only Ramsey was left. Ramsey McKay. . . .

Ramsey couldn't get away, because Steve was close on his heels now. The trail narrowed. The cattle were moving slower. There was a deep gulch at one side on the trail, and the cattle filled both the trail and the gulch. Steve had to slow down when he reached the stragglers in the herd, and push his way through them.

He saw Ramsey and Pancho up near the head of the drive. Ramsey's gun came up, and the bullet smacked into Steve's horse. It screamed, rose up high on its hind legs and crashed down into the gulch, rolling over on Steve Lassiter, smashing him, grinding him beneath its heavy weight.

Steve tried to extricate himself from the stirrups. But his boots had been forced through them with the force of the fall and he couldn't get them loose. He felt his ribs cave. He felt his right arm crack, knew that the bone had shattered. Then the horse rolled again, and Steve's head struck a stone and he knew no more. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Half a Man!

STEVE LASSITER opened his eyes. He was at home, in bed, and Justine was sitting close to him. His right arm ached and he tried to move it. Pain flew into Justine's eyes as he did that, and she put out a hand and laid it on his brow and said, "Steve. Oh, Steve, I'm *so* sorry. But it will make no difference."

Steve frowned. He looked down at his right arm. Then his eyes stayed there, frozen with horror at what he saw. For there was no arm at all!

He closed his eyes to prevent Justine from seeing the stark terror he knew was there. His mind began to whirl, recalling the fight, the chase of the cattle. Bat Morgan, Phil Galen, Pancho; then the fall down into the gulch and the broken arm. Why was his arm gone? How had it happened?

Finally he opened his eyes. Justine was crying softly. Steve reached up and touched her cheek with his left hand. "Don't cry," he begged softly. "Please."

She smiled and brushed the tears away. He didn't look at her as he said, "Tell me about it. How did it happen? Who cut it off?"

Justine's voice was low. "You went away that one night and didn't come back. I was worried. Three days went by, and I went into town. I asked the sheriff to help look for you. We went to Ramsey McKay's place and he was not home. We kept on searching, but it was two days before we found you and Ramsey and a Mexican named Pancho. This Pancho was badly wounded. Ramsey was wounded, too, and you were seriously hurt. Your arm had been so badly mangled that Ramsey had had to amputate it himself to save your life. He had to do that because all the horses had either been killed or had run away. Ramsey had no way to get you to a doctor."

Steve Lassiter said nothing. But his mind was whirling, confusion in him that Justine did not seem to know that Ramsey McKay was a dirty cattle thief.

Steve asked, "Were the cattle there, where Ramsey and I were? Some of our cattle?"

Justine shook her head. She said, "Ramsey told me that the rustlers got away with all the cattle. After you fell and hurt your arm, Ramsey and Pancho kept on fighting the rustlers. But both Pancho and Ramsey were wounded and the rustlers got the cattle across the Border and evidently sold them. The sheriff

tracked them down to the Border. He says that's what happened."

Ramsey, so glib, so clever, such a slick liar! He had the chance to get the cattle away while Steve lay unconscious. He did it, then said he had fought rustlers. No one could prove he was a liar? Even Justine, after seeing what she had seen, would have a hard time believing that Ramsey McKay was a thief.

Ramsey had finished what he started. He had stripped Steve Lassiter of every nickel he had. But why, while Steve was there unconscious, hadn't he killed him as Bat Morgan and Phil Galen and Pancho had tried to kill him. Ramsey had put a big price on Steve Lassiter's head, then had saved his life by amputating his arm. It didn't check. It worried Steve, puzzled him.

Steve was up and around in a few more days. He had almost died from loss of blood, but once he started gaining he got well fast. He was strong in short order. His arm stump healed. He had a few weeks grace left in which he could save his ranch—if he'd had two arms, or if he could convince folks that McKay was a thief. But he knew he couldn't save it. He didn't even try. Ramsey McKay had him blocked and whipped. Steve couldn't prove a thing on him.

As the days passed, Steve Lassiter's spirit dropped. He became more bitter and morose. He tried to draw a gun with his left hand, made a fumble of it, and cursed and threw the gun from him. He tried to throw a rope with his left hand. That was worse than trying to handle the gun. He came into the house and didn't go out again for days. The loss of his arm was hitting him hard; harder every day.

He tried no more. It was awkward for him to eat with his left hand, so he ate alone. He became cross, irritable, almost insulting to his wife. He brooded for hours, for days, his eyes staring off into space. What good was a one-armed cripple? In those long days of dejection he'd look ahead and see himself a bum, a tramp, riding the line-camps, begging for a hand-out. He could see his wife divorced and married to Ramsey McKay!

At times Steve wondered if he would lose his mind, or wondered if he should go blow his own brains out and get it over with. It was a cinch he was no good, no good to himself, to Justine, or to anybody. Justine would have to get a job. Would he sit around and let her earn the bread that went into his mouth? He wondered. . . .

Sometimes Steve worried about Ramsey McKay saving his life. Should he forget that Ramsey had ruined him, and remember only that he had saved his life —or forget that he had saved him and remember that he had ruined him?

Steve Lassiter lost all ambition. He had no hope. His eyes were dull, apathetic. Perpetually his lips turned downward in a half whining expression of self-pity. From start to finish he was whipped, with no more guts than a scared rabbit. He even forgot to count the days till the sheriff would come to dispossess him, so that the bank could take over. He was afraid Justine would leave him; then afraid that she would stay and go to work. He was afraid of everything.

One day Justine came into the room. Her smile was forced, as it had always been forced since he had gone to pieces. She said softly to him, "You have a visitor, dear."

Steve didn't answer her. What the hell business did he have with visitors? Then abruptly, Ramsey McKay was standing in the doorway. Steve Lassiter was staring at him, his heart pounding like a trip-hammer.

Ramsey's face was as expressionless as a wooden post. He said: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry as hell, Steve. I set out to ruin you, and I did it. I did it because I was crazy with jealousy. I was in love with Justine. But—but after this—this thing happened to you, I woke up. I—I realized that it was no good—no good at all. For by hurting you, I was also hurting Justine. I was tearing down something that a pair of pretty fine people had tried to build up. I kept thinking of what we'd been through together, and the fun we used to have. It made what I'd done and the way I'd felt, seem pretty damn' small and mean. I just want to tell you that I'll make up for it all I can. I'll sell enough cattle to pay you for all I stole."

He stood there, waiting, pathetic remorse in him.

STEVE LASSITER'S face was white as alabaster. Here was the man responsible for his downfall; the man who had made it so that Steve Lassiter's arm had to be cut off. And he stood there and said he "was sorry!" He'd "pay for the cattle he stole!" But how in hell could he pay for the arm? How could a man run a ranch when he was half a man? How could he rope, shoot? How could he . . . ?

"Get out!" Steve raged at Ramsey. "Get out, quick!"

Afterward, Justine did not mention his having been to see Steve, but Steve couldn't forget it. Pay for the cattle! Maybe he should have let him do that. But thinking of that, he knew that money was not the answer. He hated Ramsey McKay more than anything on earth, because if it hadn't been for Ramsey's rustling he would still have a right arm. He'd still be able to fight.

When Ramsey came again, Justine brought him in the room and hurried out before Steve could say anything. Ramsey stood there, his face tight and drawn, watching the dull apathy in Steve Lassiter's eyes.

"Your wife keeps asking me to come to you," he said. "She says you've gone to the dogs; that you don't have any fight left in you. She wants me to do something to help you. I gather from that that you didn't tell her about the rustled cattle?"

Steve shook his head. "What was the use? You held all the winning cards. You told such a straight story that everybody would believe it. The sheriff was there and it would check with the tracks he saw and what Pancho would say."

Ramsey McKay stared at Steve's empty sleeve. Without uttering a word he seemed to say that Steve Lassiter was as he wanted him to be—a thing without spirit.

Then he said, "I don't know what Justine thought I could do. If a man won't fight, he quits. That's all there is to it. But listen to this: I set out to ruin you—I told you that. I put a price on your head so Galen and Morgan and Pancho would try hard to stop you. But after you were down and out and I had all the cattle, there was no more need of you dying. . . . " Then McKay said suggestively. "Think—think hard about this, Steve: *Maybe it wasn't necessary to cut off your arm!*"

McKay left a white-faced man lying back in a chair, so shocked he did not move for a long, long time. That one last thing Ramsey said ran like a wild thing, in Steve's brain. "Maybe it wasn't necessary to cut off the arm! Maybe it wasn't necessary . . . ?"

Maybe— Maybe Ramsey McKay did that one last diabolical thing to be sure that Steve Lassiter could not make a comeback!

Gradually Steve's face tightened. His lips grew straight and grim. He jumped up and held his left hand, clenching his fist. "Why not whip the dirty son with that, just as if I had two? Why not?" he said aloud.

He slapped the door open, hurried through the house and out to the corral. From the door Justine called to him, and he answered, "I'll be back soon, sweet. Don't worry."

Always before it had been a hell of a job to saddle a horse with only his left hand, but now he did it fast. He rode into Geronimo as if all the imps from hell were after him. He strode into the hardware store and spent his last few dollars for a double-barrel shotgun and some shells.

"Snakes," he explained grimly to the store-keeper. "A nest of snakes that needs cleanin' out!"

Steve went to the Mexican quarter of town and looked up one Cesario Rubio. Cesario was supposed to have a yearning for other people's horses, but he was clever. His neck had slipped out of the hangman's noose by a narrow margin many times.

To him Steve said bluntly, "I need a bunch of good cow thieves, Cesario. And don't shake your head. Ramsey McKay stole me blind. He was in love with my wife. He broke me, cut off my arm when it didn't need cutting off. I'm going to break him. I'll steal all my cattle back, or I'll steal his in equal amount. We'll sell 'em in Mexico. We'll split even shares, you and me.

"You pay your men wages. I have to raise enough money in a couple weeks to save my ranch. If the law gets after

us, I'll take all the blame. I'll swear I told you I bought the cattle. You don't take a chance, except with Ramsey's guns and a little Mexican named Pancho."

Cesario studied the flickering fire in Steve's eyes for a long time. He spoke English perfectly. Finally he said, "I will be at your house tonight. I have heard of this Pancho. He thinks he is tough, but to hell with him!"

Steve rode slowly back home. He practiced a little with the shotgun, shooting jackrabbits on the run. He laughed when he hit one. By God, he was going to make the grade! He could shoot! He could ride! If he couldn't rope he'd hire somebody to do the roping for him! Nothing on earth could whip Steve Lassiter!

Steve waited impatiently at the house until Rubio's men came at sundown.

Justine watched, but asked no questions. Steve kissed her, laughing with his eyes while he held her face in his one hand. What a fool he'd been to lie around moping and pouting and feeling sorry for himself! His day had come; the sun was up for him again! A fight was on the way. Life was worth living.

He said, "I'll be back in the morning." And he knew he would be back. No thought of defeat was in him now.

He rode away with Cesario and four Mexicans. When they came to Ramsey's range, they rounded up all the cattle they could move, heading them south over the same trail Ramsey had taken Steve's. As they neared the pass a figure came close, big-hatted, slight-framed. Pancho!

Steve Lassiter smiled. He rode out ahead of the others. Pancho was wary. Then suddenly he recognized Steve. He reached for a gun, but Steve blasted him out of the saddle with the shotgun. He waved his gun with his one arm and the Mexicans pushed the cattle on.

"Ramsey McKay! To hell with you!" Steve Lassiter laughed exultantly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bloody Harvest

THE next day Ramsey McKay came to Steve. He wore no guns. He complained, "I found that little Mexican. He was shot, but he wasn't dead. Before he died he said you shot him and rustled some of my cattle. Howcome? You don't have to do that. I offered you all the cattle I took."

Steve's eyes glowed. "Why I don't kill you, I don't know. But I do know this—I'm going to break you flat. I lost more than cattle. I lost something you can't give back. But you'll pay for it. When I get through with you there won't be a cow on your range. Not a damned cow! Bank on that, Ramsey!"

Ramsey McKay's face whitened. He warned, "I'll fight you on that, Steve. I don't want to; I don't hate you, but I'd fight anybody in the world who tried it. I can't go broke. I *won't* go broke! No man can break me!"

Steve smiled coldly as Ramsey McKay rode away.

The Mexicans wanted to rest but Steve prodded them on. He had not much time. They could spend all their money at once when it was over. So the next night they rounded up more cattle, heading them for the pass. McKay tried to stop them, but Steve rode toward him, his shotgun blasting, and Ramsey turned and ran.

The next night McKay's newly hired gunmen were patrolling the range. Steve smiled, knowing that Ramsey was getting worried. He was discovering that two could play at the game of rustling. He didn't like it.

The Mexicans refused to try to get the cattle while the gunmen were there, so Steve circled, got a few cows and started them running. The gunmen came hell for leather, ready for a kill. But while they were after Steve, the Mexicans started a good sized herd into the pass. Steve beat the gunmen to the pass, leaped off his horse and hunkered behind a rock with his shotgun leveled across it.

The gun blasted a thunderous hole in the night as the gunmen came close. They stopped suddenly, circled. Steve Lassiter laughed. Then they came again, charging.

Steve waited, holding his fire until they were close. A horse and rider went down. Another charge of buckshot whistled through the night, upsetting two more riders. Still they came.

Steve dropped the gun between his legs, broke it open and flipped out the empty

shells. Two more slipped in. They were very close now, so close he could see the white froth on the mouths of their mounts. He let go another blast of buckshot. Then another. They whirled, and ran away. They didn't come back. . . .

Cesario Rubio came back through the pass next morning, gold jingling in his pockets. The Mexicans had confidence in him now and they laughed and joked and were willing to give it another whirl that night. They liked the feel of easy money in their jeans.

Halfway home that day Ramsey hailed Steve from a perch atop a hill. He called, "Listen. You have to stop this! We're even now. You're breaking me. I was ready to play ball with you, but I'm warning you, if you keep it up I'll get you!"

Steve Lassiter said to Cesario, "Keep a rifle trained on that hombre. He might try to shoot me." Then he called to Ramsey, "It don't tally that way in my book, Ramsey! The way I figure it, we'll never be even. When I break you flat I'll laugh myself sick. If you'd like to settle it another way, come down here with a gun!"

Ramsey McKay slid back out of sight, and Steve rode home.

He had three days left. That night, when he took another herd, there were no gunmen. Maybe McKay was running out of money.

The next night would do it. Day after tomorrow Steve Lassiter could walk into the bank and lay the cash on the barrelhead for what he owed the bank, just as he could have done it had not Ramsey McKay stolen all his cattle. And that night Ramsey would be broke. He wouldn't have a dime!

That night Steve Lassiter was filled with excitement. He sensed something he could not explain. He wondered if it was fear that it all would fail, now that he was so near success. But when they came to Ramsey's range he felt an easing of the tension. There were no guards on the range.

They gathered the cattle, headed them for the pass. But as they came close, a gun flamed from the darkness. A bullet sang past Steve Lassiter's ear. The cattle milled. The riders scattered. And Steve rode to a brush clump and dismounted.

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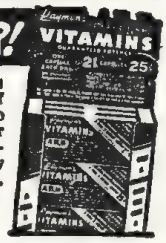

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He began to inch forward, the old game of hide and seek putting fire into his eyes. The gun stayed quiet. Steve came close to the mouth of the pass, and now he could see a dim, lone figure crouched there. He inched closer, recognizing Ramsey McKay at the mouth of the pass. Steve smiled. Ramsey making a last stand. That was as it should be. Ramsey with his back to the wall!

Steve pushed his shotgun forward, cocked it. At the click, Ramsey McKay whirled. He called, "Who's that?"

Steve said, "It's me, Ramsey. It's Steve. Let's have it out!"

With startling suddenness Ramsey's gun began to snarl. Bullets kicked up sand in Steve's face and blinded him. He rolled over and blinked his eyes and let go a blast of buckshot. McKay wilted down into the shadows behind the rock.

Steve rose. He loaded the gun, went over to Ramsey and found him alive, staring up at Steve with both hate and expectancy in his eyes. He groaned, "Go ahead, shoot! Damn you, go ahead and get it over with!" Then he fainted.

Steve smiled. He leaned the shotgun against a rock, got Ramsey on his shoulder and carried him out to where the Mexicans held the cattle. He said, "There's nobody in the pass now. Take 'em through. I'll cart this skunk to a doctor."

Cesario Rubio stared hard at Steve. He asked, "Is that Ramsey McKay?"

Steve said, "Yes."

Rubio said, a puzzled frown on his brow, "And didn't Ramsey McKay steal all your cattle and wish to steal your wife? And didn't he cut off your arm when it was not necessary for it to be cut off?"

Steve answered, "Yes."

Rubio made a motion to the other Mexicans, indicating to them to drive the cattle on. "Then," he said, "you are a fool. For a snake is always a snake and that man is a snake. If you do not kill one when you have your heel on his head, it will live to bite you again. You should kill him now."

Steve grinned. Somehow he liked the idea of Ramsey McKay living and trying to bite him again. Somehow he knew that because Ramsey McKay had taunted him

with the fact that he had cut off his arm unnecessarily, Steve Lassiter was alive today; alive and fighting and almost wishing that Ramsey would get well and on his feet again so there could be another fight!

Steve ordered, "Take 'em on through, Cesario. We just look at things different."

Steve carried Ramsey to town across his horse. He laid him on the cot in the doctor's office. The doctor examined Ramsey. He said, "He's got a lot of buckshot in him, Steve. But he'll live."

Steve went back home. The next day he paid off the mortgage on his ranch.

Steve Lassiter made good, but Ramsey McKay didn't. Right after he lost his ranch he left the country. . . .

★

TWO years later, Ramsey McKay rode back into Geronimo. It was noon, and nobody noticed him.

Ramsey McKay watched Steve ride down the street, tall, erect, tanned and stern-faced, with that one sleeve tucked in up nearly to the shoulder. Under Steve's leg, in a saddle boot, the butt of a shotgun protruded.

Steve stopped at the *Geronimo Bugle,* the weekly paper in the little cowtown. He came out with a paper in his hand. He did not look at nor see Ramsey McKay as Ramsey stood at the corner of the saloon. When Steve was gone Ramsey got a paper and looked at it. There was an advertisement in it:

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Ramsey McKay watched Steve Lassiter ride away. Ramsey's faded levis were patched. His boots were old and torn and run over. He was gaunt and hollow-eyed.

He tossed the paper away, got his old nag from the hitch-rail and climbed into the saddle. He kept remembering all that had happened when he had hated Steve Lassiter so intensely. But he didn't hate him now; he hadn't since one day he'd looked at Steve Lassiter, unconscious and

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with one arm mangled. Vaguely he wondered if Steve Lassiter would kill him. It wouldn't make much difference. . . .

Later, he was staring at Steve Lassister, one-armed, but strong and alert, standing beside the porch of his ranch house.

Ramsey McKay said, "I—I need a job, Steve. I saw that ad. I. . . ."

Steve Lassiter was shaking his head. He said, "I been looking for you, ever since you left. Your old Chinese cook told me all about it. You *did* have to cut off my arm! You lied, just to make me fighting mad, so I'd be a man again. You fought me, yes, when I tried to break you. But I'd have fought you. I. . . ."

Steve Lassiter stopped. He looked out across the hills. He said, "You've been a fool, Ramsey. You told me that. But I've been one, too. I need some punchers, but I need a pardner more. How about it? Let's make this the M-L ranch —McKay and Lassiter."

Steve Lassiter thrust out his left hand. Ramsey McKay took it and gripped it hard. He said softly, "McKay and Lassiter. That sounds swell, Steve."

THE END

The editors of *Star Western* deeply regret to tell its readers that this is John G. Pearsol's last story. He died suddenly at his desk, while writing the final words to the novel you have just finished reading.

Because this short novel impressed us as being typical of Mr. Pearsol's best work, we are glad to include it in this issue, thus giving our readers seven stories, instead of the customary six.

To this magazine, John G. Pearsol's loss will be doubly felt, for not only was he among its first and most prolific contributors, but he was also a warm personal friend. We know that the thousands of our readers who enjoy Western fiction will long remember the colorful, warmly human stories that were written by John G. Pearsol.

—The Editors.

(Continued from page 111)

cried, whirling. "An' *this'll* do for *you!*"

The barman's next shot knocked the hat from the Association man's head. The third struck him in the shoulder, turning

him part way around. But the fourth shot was from John Irons' gun. And there was no need for a fifth. Red Ira Shane was on the ground, dying.

* * *

There was a wedding in the Strombotany home that night. Big Sam himself did the honors, having resumed his capacity as sheriff and justice of the peace. And Timmy wed his girl on the night of the day he was to have been hanged.

John Irons would have been best man, but his wound confined him to Big Sam's eight-foot bed. The bride kissed him, however, in bed and all. And when the crowd had thinned out, the talk turned to events of the day and to John Irons' miracle in witching a gold well—a well that made Timmy the richest man in the county, and gave him the backing he needed to build up his ranch.

Big Sam expounded his friend's virtues prodigiously.

"I knowed you could name the color of a horse from a week old track," the ponderous lawman remarked, "an' the weight of a spring bull by the way his horns curl. But I don't know how you kin see into the ground, an' read men's minds!"

"It's one of them things," the Association man replied modestly. "I knew a man once that got a colt, when he was just a big kid, fillin' out. Every day that kid went out to the barn an' lifted his colt, jus' to show his pa he could. Time they was both growed up, that man could still lift his horse, an' folks couldn't understand it. . . .

"So I expect," he finished, "it's all in what we get used to!"

THE END

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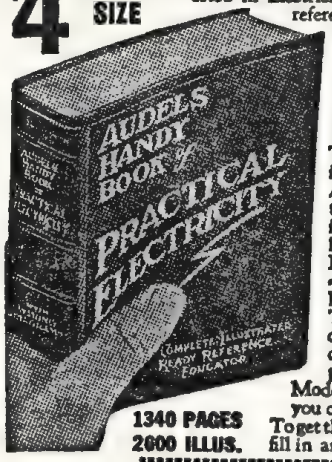

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(Concluded from page 6)

Next Spring, only Farnsworth came out. He had bullet-holes in his clothes, knife wounds on his body, and was anxious to tell all comers, with appropriate grief, how he and Hume had been attacked by Indians.

A pair of prospectors, however, in the meanwhile had discovered Farnsworth's camp, and dragged a headless cadaver from the creek. They buried it and headed for Monoville to report their grisly find just as the posse was starting out to try to search for Farnsworth's "Indians." Impressed by the story, the posse stayed long enough to hold Farnsworth, and the ring on the finger of the corpse afterward identified the body as Hume's.

All circumstances pointed to Hume having been murdered by white men—or a white man—rather than by marauding Indians. Several Indians meanwhile had been captured and held for questioning. One of them searched the creek, and actually discovered Hume's decapitated head.

Farnsworth was now supposedly safe in the Monoville jail, waiting to be tried for murder. He escaped however, and seemed to elude all pursuit. The head of the murdered Hume was buried in a keg near the scene of the killing.

A few years later, hydraulic operations washed it out, and it was once more interred. Again, a decade or so later, it was dug up, and found to be petrified.

What happened to Farnsworth? History does not record. Safe to say he went on no more prospecting trips around the headwaters of the Owen, nor did he attempt to interest pardners in his claim around Monoville or Carson. He was, as late as the '70's, reported having been seen in Honey Valley, California.

Thank you for your interesting addenda to the Lost Cement Mine Legend, Mr. Nichols. Perhaps some more of our Branding Crew have other tales of lost mines they would like to tell about. How about it, Gang?

See you-all next issue. Until then, *Salud y pesetas!* —*STRAWBOSS*

★ UP THE TRAIL ★

AS WE'VE noted here before, the majority of the men who write our stories are the two-fisted kind of Westerners who've been there and done things, and then let us share, through their fiction, their colorful adventures laid against the ever-new background of the frontier West. John G. Pearsol, whose last story appears in this issue, was no exception to the rule that the best fighting men make the best writing men.

As a veteran of over-seas action during World War I., and later, as a member of those highly specialized riders of Uncle Sam's called the U. S. Border Patrol, John Pearsol made a hand to ride with. Later, settling in El Paso, he gave all of us the benefit of his first-hand experience in the Southwest in the stirring fiction he wrote for *Star Western*. His stories will live long in the memory of everyone who cherishes the frontier tradition.

John Pearsol knew and liked people, and he had the knack of bringing his characters to life in his stories. With few exceptions, the pathway of the professional fiction writer is far from easy. It's a craft which must usually be learned the hard way, and the learning is without end, for there is no story written which could not, in some way, be improved. Many writers have a degree of native talent but lack the determination and self-discipline —usually known as guts—to carry their gift successfully forward. Also, many of them lack that warmth and sympathetic understanding which brings to cold type the life blood of human characterization. John Pearsol lacked none of these things.

We don't know whether he was a native Texan or a Texan by adoption, but we do know that John Pearsol carried where ever he went, a bit of the state he loved. It was deep within him, and in every Western story he wrote. When he left for that last long ride, he departed as most of us would like to go, when we're called, and in a way that seems singularly fitting for a Texan and a writer—with his boots on, sitting at his desk, writing one of his vigorous stories of the frontier people he best knew and loved.

—The Editors.

LAW

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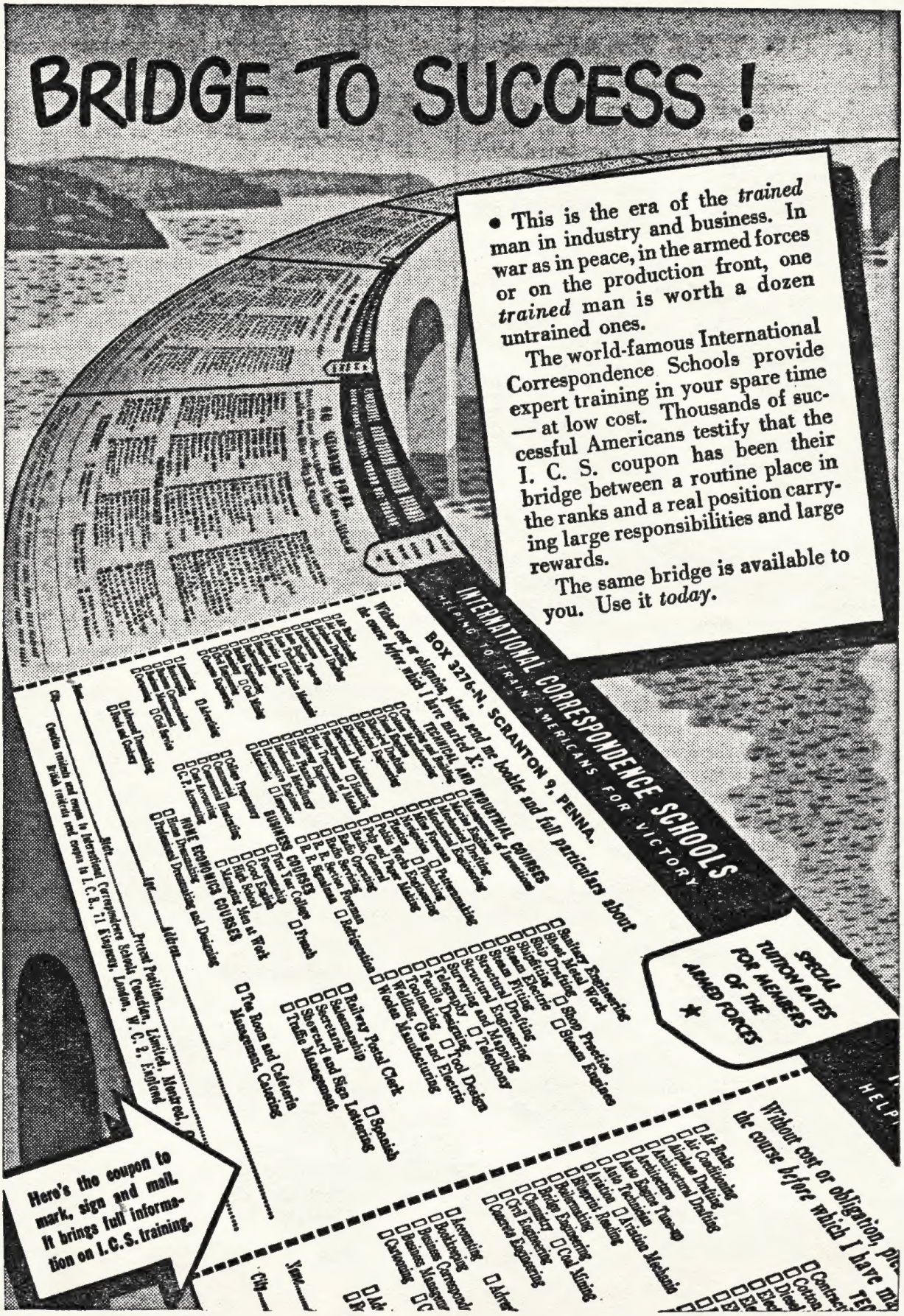
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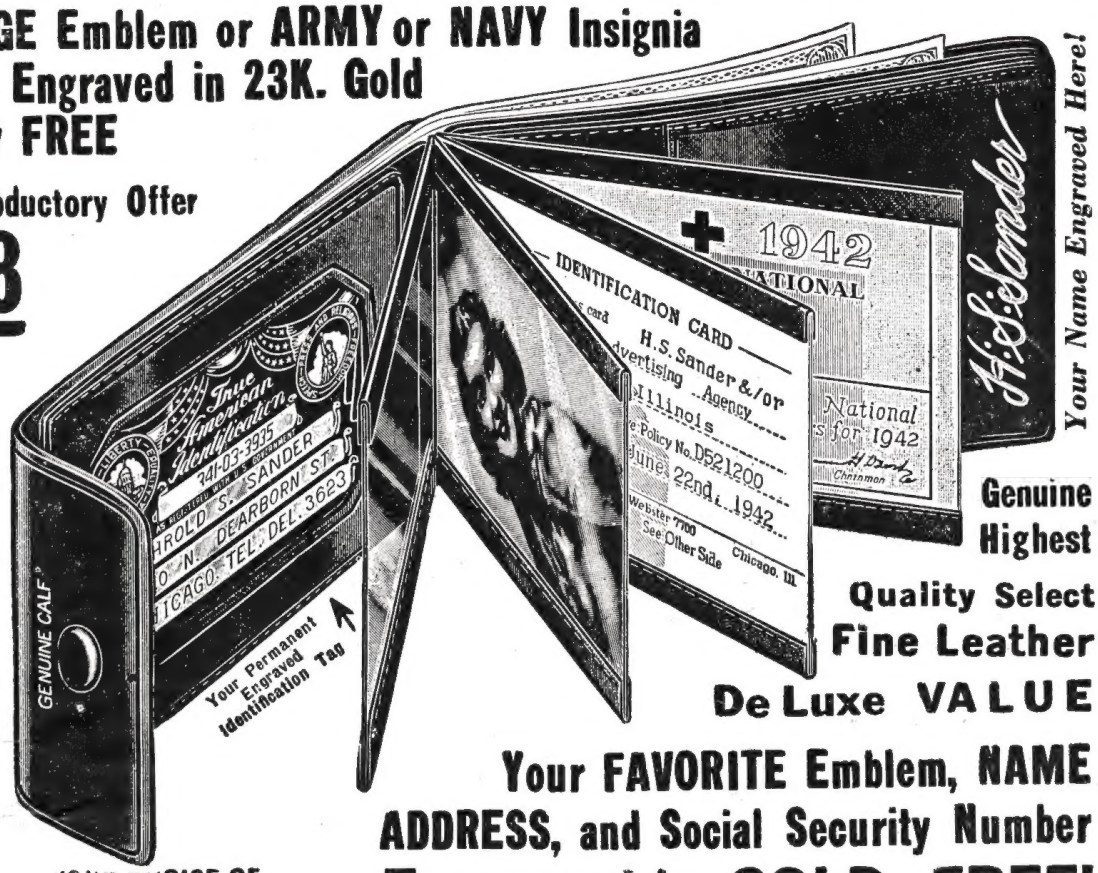

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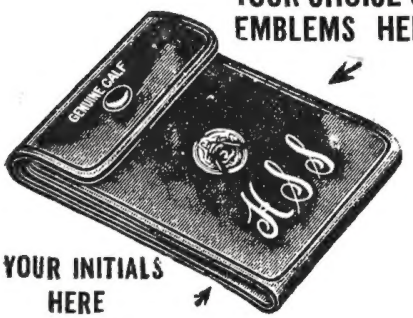

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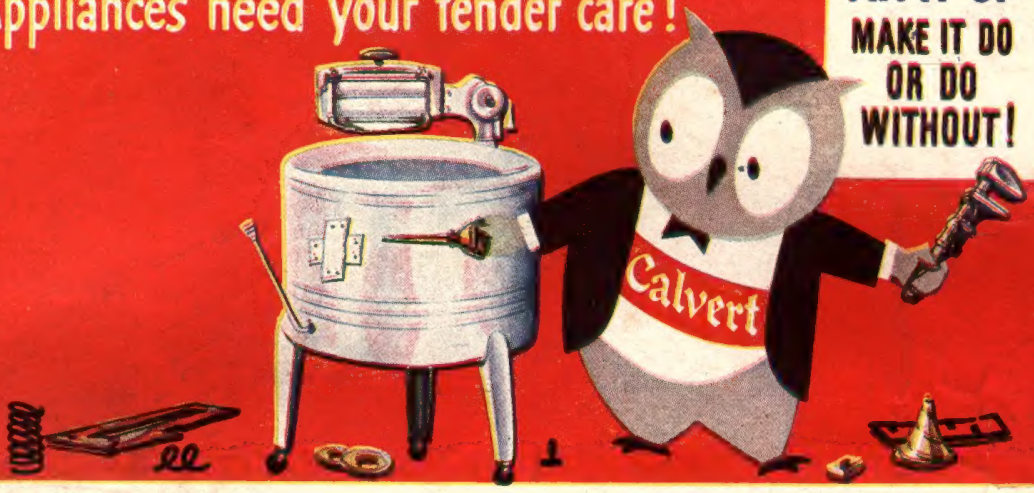
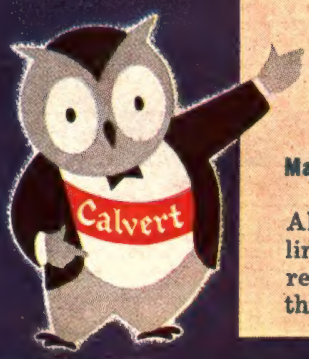


When things wear out, or fail to go — Try patching first, and save your dough!



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